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CONSTANTINE CAY

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CONSTANTINE CAY

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CONSTANTINE CAY

by
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For Denise and Eric

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1

LAST NIGHT A skein of geese flew above the ruins of the old house. They were flying high, with their long necks stretched out before them, and as their wings beat down, the sound of the air through their pinions came down to me as a high, clear note, so that I could hear it over the softer murmur of the sea. They flew steadily south, with a kind of certainty. Whether they were young geese, taking the air together for the first time, or older birds returning to nest after wintering in some distant place, I had no means of knowing. Nevertheless, whatever instinct drove them unquestioningly on their way stirred a chord in my memory, and I found myself remembering how long ago I had watched another such flight of birds and envied them the home they sought.

Long ago? I climbed up what was left of the great colonnade, and a brick twisted free and fell beneath my feet. The columns were all gone now, along with the tall windows of lead glass that old Reddish Constantine had brought from Alabama with such care and pride. It seemed that I was looking back over the centuries, but in truth it was little more than two months since the day that I had first heard of Gaytons, and the Constantines, or for that matter Constantine Cay itself.

Two months is no very great span. I considered, standing there in the gathering dusk, how strange that I could be reckoned so very inconsiderable a part of history. And yet for those concerned it might well represent the crucial period of

a person's life, as indeed it had mine. Time was when I would have given all I had and more to have been able to turn my back on the islands, and be transported all in an instant to the sound of horses' hooves on the cobbled streets of Bristol once again. To feel a damp, cool wind from the Severn blowing against my face and to be able to look down on the masts of the shipping lying at Alverston and to wonder, with all the delicious excitement of the schoolroom, about the seas they had crossed and the strange sights in distant places that their crews must have seen.

I am glad now that for me, at least, there was to be no going back. Standing there last night, among all that was left of Gaytons, I knew that I had said goodbye for ever to the past. There was no point in trying to recapture the girl who had lived those two months, because I knew quite suddenly she was dead and gone to join the ghosts of all the others who had loved and hated and struggled and sometimes died in the shadow of the great house on the coral strand.

I had only been a year over twenty when my mother died. By then I was the only member of the family left at home, for both my brothers had lately married and moved far away, one to the North of England and another to take up a post with a firm of solicitors in Norfolk. They were fully absorbed with their wives and young children, and, although there was no lack of affection between us, I felt instinctively that it would have been unfair of me to call on either of them for a home.

I was a quiet girl, as I suppose was natural for one who had grown used to the company of an older woman in indifferent health, and a little shy of people of my own age. I never wanted to be a governess, but my mother had not set great store by my marriage prospects. Perhaps it was partly because I had little opportunity to mix with suitable young men, but also because I had inherited the red hair, pale skin and blue-green eyes of my grandmother, a combination, my mother had often told me, that did little for a girl except make her destined to be a governess.

Alone in the world with no one to take me in, it had been hard to imagine what else there was for me to do. A master

mariner, my father had, by reason of his calling, always been a strange, almost legendary figure, best known to me from a photographic portrait that throughout my childhood had stared at me from the fireside table.

In his youth my father, Captain Josiah Silverwood, must have been a striking-looking man and even in late middle age he had contrived to retain a commanding manner that blended well with the natural strength of his clean-shaven face, always deeply tanned by years of tropical sun. As I understood it, he had at one time been in the tea trade, and even master of one of the clippers that had plied regularly between Bristol and the China seas. Later, when he had become owner of the *Maid of Bristol*, he had travelled more frequently to the Americas than the East, although, so far as his family was concerned, the effect had been much the same. To my regret he talked little of his travels, perhaps because he thought them of small interest to my mother. However, he remained honoured, even loved I suppose, albeit seen infrequently. So infrequently that it had come as a genuine surprise when he had sailed into Bristol three weeks after my mother's funeral.

I think he grieved for my mother, but he did not show it. Perhaps over the years he had grown so used to a solitary life that it did not come easy to him to express his feelings and indeed even to talk more than was necessary.

But we did speak a little of my future and I told him of my reluctance to intrude upon my brothers. I had a wish to see a little of the world. Very tentatively I mentioned a possibility of a position as companion to a Mrs. Welling who was going to America to look after some business interests.

To my surprise he encouraged me. 'See some of the world while you may, Judith. There's little enough here for either of us.' Then he pressed a small bag of sovereigns into my hand—and added, 'This is all I have at the moment, but there will be certainly more where that came from. Take your post for a year, then I may send for you, and if my plans are successful, we will make a home together, far from Bristol.'

I suppose, in a way I was disappointed, for I had half

hoped he might take me on one of his voyages. I did truly want to see something of the world, for I must have had something of my father's restless instinct inside me. I had always realised there was a world outside Bristol and England, so, if I was to see even a part of it, the decision to do so must lie with me.

I had not particularly wanted to offer myself as companion to Mrs. Welling, but I told myself that a year would pass quickly, and she was giving me a chance to see something of America, a country not long since risen from the strife of civil war. She was to visit Atlanta where, I understood, she had business interests. The thought of even such modest exploration had proved too potent a temptation for one in as restless a mood as mine.

Atlanta, and most certainly Mrs. Welling, seemed long gone last night. Standing among the remains of Gaytons, I had found myself realising how different a person I had become in two short months. Unless, in some strange way, we are always the same, and only come to know our capacities as greater and greater demands are made on us.

I know that as I picked my way through the splintered wood that had once been the floor of the deeply shaded porch, my eye had caught sight of a single door, wrenched from its hinges but otherwise whole. High up one side was an irregularity in the wood, so it was still possible to trace the final resting place of the pistol bullet that had so nearly dictated a different end to my story. I touched the place with my finger and smiled, and I remember thinking that the very fact that I could smile at all at such a memory was a true measure of all that had happened to me in those two months.

Malachi's deep voice behind me reminded me that the boat was ready. 'Thank you, Malachi, I'm coming.'

I made my way to the firmness of the still warm sand and down to the edge of the water where the others were waiting. I did not look back. But when some time later someone asked me what I had been doing back there among the ruins of the house, I smiled and said: 'Remembering.'

* * *

I think my life changed the day I saw the pelicans. From the corner of the balcony of Mr. McAvoy's premises on the Strand at Charleston on the South Carolina coast I could see five of them flying steadily, in line, not more than a score of feet above the brilliant blue of the water. It took me a little time to realise what they were, for to me they were still an exotic species, familiar only from books. It seemed strange and wonderful that creatures so grotesque when walking upon the ground could be possessed of such grace and beauty in their flight. Suddenly wanting to share the moment I cried out: 'Why, they're pelicans!'

Mr. McAvoy came out from behind his desk and stood beside my chair so that he could see through the same window. As he joined me I saw that he was an even shorter man than I had supposed, although the broad shoulders beneath the grey broadcloth he wore in spite of the heat, gave him an air of strength surprising in one who could scarcely have been less than sixty years of age. His hair was quite white, and his features, although somewhat austere, were for me as comfortingly familiar as his voice. From all I had heard, Thomas McAvoy must have spent the greater part of his life in the Americas, yet his speech was still more reminiscent of the Highlands than Virginia.

'Aye, they're pelicans sure enough,' he agreed. 'Have you not seen them before, ma'am?'

'Only in a zoological garden,' I confessed. 'But of course they had their wings clipped, so they couldn't fly. They are such clumsy creatures on the ground, I never imagined they could look so graceful in the air.'

'They are not so common here. Florida now is a different matter. That's where those will be off to.'

I stared after the pelicans, still winging their way steadily south, but already growing small and remote, no longer identifiable as anything except birds.

'It's strange,' I said. And then in answer to the unspoken query; 'Strange that the same bird should look so different.'

Mr. McAvoy went back behind his desk again. 'Are you thinking perhaps that you look different, now you are in another country along with them?'

Curiously, it was so close to what I had indeed been thinking that the remark startled me. Could my feelings be that clear to a stranger? And yet it was not an unreasonable conjecture. Although at home in Bristol I had perhaps been not altogether a pelican among my own kind, certainly no one had ever remarked on my grace and beauty. Perhaps, I told myself wryly, I might also undergo some kind of sea change . . .

'If you'll seat yourself, Miss Silverwood,' the dry voice broke in on my thoughts, 'we'll be about your business. Am I correct in assuming that you are a British subject desirous of repatriation?'

'Yes,' I said, 'that is so.'

'And that you have at present not the means to finance this in the usual manner?'

'Not at present.'

I wondered if I had any right to make such a statement with so much confidence. There was, so far as I knew, a very little credit still standing to my account. There was also my father's twenty guineas, but I felt I had to keep that for some real emergency. If the worst came to the worst there was my brother Edward to turn to, much though I disliked the idea, since he had disapproved of my whole journey. So I said uncertainly, 'It is possible that I might obtain funds from England eventually. But that would take time. And as I have no means of maintaining myself, more time than I can afford.' Even as I spoke I wondered where on the high seas my father was. It seemed a long time since I had heard from him.

Mr. McAvoy picked up the sheet of paper from his desk that I recognised as the letter I had written on my arrival in Charleston three days earlier.

'I regret I was unable to see you earlier, but business held me out of town until today. I see you are resident at Miss Pilkington's guest house.'

'Yes. An official at the railway station recommended it to me.'

'Aye. It's a decent enough establishment.' He raised his eyes and studied me through the thick spectacles he wore. 'You say here that you were employed as companion to a

Mrs. Welling. In what circumstances was your employment terminated?'

It was a question I had known must be asked, and yet now that it had come I felt the colour coming into my face and with it a sense of anger that I should be the one to be embarrassed. 'Mrs. Welling was visiting Atlanta for business reasons,' I said at length. 'She . . . she is a widow and her husband left her the control of certain interests there. She seems to be a competent woman and attends to many commercial matters for herself. Unfortunately . . .' I paused, trying to seek the right words.

'Unfortunately?'

'There was an incident at the hotel. One of Mrs. Welling's contractors with whom we had been dining had taken too much wine. He took it upon himself to . . . to come to my room.' I shuddered slightly as I remembered the sordid scuffle with Bronson's foot in the door, the humiliation of my own tears and the servants running. I only wanted to forget, if it were possible, the moment when Mrs. Welling had come out of her own room with what I could only recognise as a look of pleasure in her eyes. I could only imagine that she wished that it were herself he had forced his attention upon.

'I'm not wishing to embarrass you, Miss Silverwood—but what happened then?'

By now my cheeks were scarlet, but I forced myself to sound calm and matter of fact. 'The man tried to justify his conduct by saying that I had encouraged him. For reasons best known to herself Mrs. Welling chose to believe him.'

'And you got on your high horse and flounced off?' Mr. McAvoy suggested. 'Keeping your reputation intact, but with not a penny piece in your pocket.' He looked at me over the top of his spectacles. 'Not a wise course of judgment, if I may say so.'

'No,' I admitted, 'I suppose not. But at such times one is apt to overlook the practical.'

'Oh aye, pride's a fine thing all right.' My host fiddled with my letter. 'But you are not explaining what brought you here.'

'My father traded in the Americas for many years. He

spoke often of Mr. Rush, the agent here. Because of their friendship, he seemed someone I might approach for help.'

'Jamie Rush has been retired and taken himself home o'er a year back.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I had gathered as much.'

He was silent for a moment, then he said, 'I didn't have the pleasure of Captain Silverwood's acquaintance. I pray he has been spared?'

'I have not seen him for nine months,' I told him, 'but I believe he is well. In the last letter I received from him it seemed to me he was considering giving up the seas. Should that be so, then I shall probably make my home with him.'

'And you'll be glad to stay at home after your travels?'

'Only for a little while. My father spoke of settling abroad. I think I should like that.'

'Aye, that's understandable if you have a taste for travel.' He picked up a document from the desk before him and studied it for a while before saying, 'You'll not be getting back home on a British ship from Charleston save in exceptional circumstances for which I'd not wish to be relying. But one of our own ports, now, might well be a different matter.'

'But we have no ports in this country, Mr. McAvoy,' I pointed out.

'No, not since the third George, more's the pity. But the Bahama Islands still come under the protection of the Crown, to the best of my knowledge. What's more, the *Trinity* is loading at Nassau at this moment, bound for Plymouth, and the fact that her master is an old friend of mine might be considered providential.' The agent pursed his lips before adding judiciously, 'It's by no means in the ordinary run of business, Miss Silverwood, and a rash practice into the bargain. But a note from me should get you a passage, and your credit good until you are in reach of friends again.'

My heart warmed to Mr. McAvoy, for he had no need to use his friends on my behalf. I did my best to thank him, but he stopped me with a gesture.

'Away, girl, you're not at Nassau port yet.'

I had, of course, forgotten, for compared with the infinity that lay between myself and home, the Bahamas seemed vir-

tually across the street. 'But there must be traders with whom I could take passage . . .' I started.

'Were we in Florida, true enough, but it is our fortune to be in the State of South Carolina.' Mr. McAvoy shuffled the papers on his desk, then threw them down. 'My memory's not what it was. Away back to Miss Pilkington with you, and I'll find a captain somewhere in this God-forsaken port who'll take you where you want to go. One shall call on you by this time tomorrow.'

Again I tried to express my gratitude, but he would have none of my thanks, and so I went again into the sultry heat of Bay Street and, because I had not money to spare for a cab, walked back to the rambling, faded grandeur of Miss Pilkington's establishment on Cormont to await whatever it was that fate and the good-hearted old Scot should take it into their heads to send me.

I waited all the next day and hope began to die a little. I could not move far from the house in case I should miss a caller, so the hours seemed to pass all the more slowly. In the late afternoon I sat on by the magnolia tree while the dusk came swiftly, as it does in those parts. Charleston is famous for its magnolias, and since the day of my arrival I had marvelled that on every side one could see trees heavy with great, ivory blossoms. Yet, doubtless through some trick of the wind, it was only on this particular occasion that I found myself conscious of their cloying scent, heavy on the night air. It was overpowering, yet sufficiently novel not to be distasteful, and so I sat on, watching the fireflies beginning their dance in the far corners of the garden and listening to the low sound of singing from the servants' quarters out beyond the stabling. At first it seemed natural to assume it was some kind of spiritual, because at the time I knew so little of negro music that it seemed to me unlikely to be anything else. And yet, although there is resignation in that particular kind of hymn, there is hope too, and God knows there was none in the low chant that rose and fell in that quiet garden.

I was sufficiently used to the singing to find it no longer remarkable, for to make music seemed part of the very soul of the coloured people in the Southern States. But this was so

different that I found it unnerving. I should have gone indoors to be free of it, had it not been for the fact that I had little taste for the company of the few other residents of Miss Pilkington's guest house, who I knew from experience would only seek to draw me into a game of *piquet* and endless chatter. And so I sat on, full of a growing apprehension of something I could not understand.

I was still there when Raoul Fernac came down from the steps of the house and found me.

I find it hard, now that so much time has passed, to recapture the feelings that first sight of Raoul awoke in me. Most people's lives conform to a certain pattern, and I suppose it is only on very infrequent occasions that one comes face to face with a person who is so far outside one's everyday world as to be totally unfamiliar.

Raoul Fernac was a sea captain, and as such he should, I suppose, have been a man in all essentials like my father. Indeed, a time was to come when I would realise that the two had much in common, but at first sight they could scarcely have been more dissimilar.

My father was a short, broad-shouldered man with a face that, even as a child, had seemed to me like the figurehead of one of the ships I used to watch in the harbour—stern and weathered as carved wood. A solid rock of a man who moved, if not with a sailor's traditional rolling gait, at least with a certain firmness of step that had come from years of steadying himself on pitching decks. But Raoul—no, Raoul Fernac was none of these things.

'Miss Silverwood?'

I told him yes, that was I, and he walked up to where I was sitting and inclined his head to me with a smile.

'My name is Captain Raoul Fernac. Mr. McAvoy has been in touch with me to say that I may be of service to you.'

He must have been a little less than six feet tall, deceptively slim in the beautifully cut knee-length coat that was clearly admirable in the drawing rooms of Charleston, although strange wear for a man of the sea. There was more than a smack of the dandy in the grey gloves he carried, the ebony cane and the shirt front that was a cascade of fine

lace. But most of all it was the man's face that caught and riveted me. I thought then, and time has not altered that first impression, that Raoul Fernac was the most striking-looking man I had ever met. There were many views as to what is handsome, and there was a certain irregularity about this man's face that divorced it from the perfection one sees in works of art. It was a Latin face, as showed in the thick, almost blue-black hair, sombre dark eyes and faintly olive skin, and with a bone structure more delicate than is usual in Northern men. Yet there was something about his mouth that was as harsh and inflexible as that of any sea raider of olden times, and in some contradictory way the elegance of the man's dress seemed to emphasise the fact. He reminded me a little of some early eastern miniature of an Indian Prince caressing a cheetah with a jewelled collar. Decorative beyond question, but a creature on whom only the foolish would turn their backs.

As I met his eyes for the first time I felt a strange little tingle over my skin, as if there was an unusual amount of electricity in the air. And then it was gone and I thought how foolish and untried I was, unused to being alone in the company of a personable man.

'It is kind of you to call on me yourself. Won't you sit down.' I gestured to the other seat beneath the tree.

He nodded and seated himself with the same grace with which he appeared to do everything. A man so sure of himself to be totally at ease, even when approaching an improvident Englishwoman, was already, I imagined, framing the words that would make a charitable offer acceptable to my traditional pride.

'May I offer you some refreshment?'

'Thank you, no. I have just dined.'

Those sombre eyes were studying me in a manner that was frankly curious, but which for some reason I found not objectionable. I wondered about his accent, or rather the lack of it. It had none of what to me seemed the over-cultivated mannerisms of the South. If anything, Raoul Fernac's speech was accentless to a degree that set it apart, as does that of anyone who has a perfect mastery of an alien tongue. Per-

haps it was coincidence, or possibly he really did have an ability to read the thoughts of others, because he smiled suddenly and supplied the answer to the question that had been in my mind.

'Like yourself, I am a foreigner in these parts. It is three generations since the Fernacs settled in Louisiana, but it seems we remain more French than American.' As he spoke I saw that he was toying with a narrow golden fob, on the end of which was a brass compass. My father had worn just such a one on his watch chain, I remembered, and I suppose my heart warmed to this stranger because it gave a touch of something that was both sailor-like and familiar to his otherwise almost too fashionable appearance.

'Everyone has heard of the elegance of New Orleans. I imagined its men passing the time in salons rather than commanding ships.'

Raoul Fernac showed even white teeth beneath the carefully groomed line of his moustache. 'True. But the war changed the lives of even the Louisiana French—and God knows we are not a progressive race. But when it comes to a choice between genteel starvation and a slightly *déclassé* but profitable activity . . . Needless to say, I am the cause of considerable shame and distress to my family. Even though they have no qualms about accepting my financial support.'

'Mr. McAvoy must have explained why I need to reach Nassau,' I said. 'As I shall be sailing from there on a British ship I shall be able to pay for my passage when I reach home. With you it is clearly different . . . and as . . .'

'If you are about to ask what I shall charge to transport you to the Bahamas,' Captain Fernac broke in, 'the answer is nothing.'

I shook my head. 'Mr. McAvoy must have realised that I have no desire to rely on someone's generosity. I admit that I find myself embarrassed financially, but not to a degree where I cannot pay whatever is right and just for the service I require.'

The Captain from Louisiana drew a cigar from his pocket. 'If you have no objections? And the smoke will keep away the mosquitoes.'

'Please smoke if you wish.'

'You are very gracious.' I wondered for a moment if he was mocking me, but then realised all of a sudden that although he used no French words his speech was directly translated from that language, thereby giving it a curious but not unattractive formality. He lit the black cheroot before adding, 'Perhaps I should have expressed myself better. I require no money in exchange for your passage to Nassau. But you can at the same time do me a service that will leave no question of your obligation.'

'I shall be happy to try,' I said, 'but I find it hard to imagine what I may do aboard ship that cannot be done better . . . I broke off abruptly and felt the blood coming into my face only to be unreasonably angry that he should so obviously have noticed the fact, even though it was only his dark eyes that mocked me a little.

'Do not distress yourself. I would ask nothing of you that ill became you. But it so happens that I have a child on board.'

I suppose I must have sounded as surprised as I felt. 'A child?'

'Yes indeed. A small boy whom I judge to be about ten years of age. He needs . . .' Raoul Fernac hesitated briefly before ending, '. . . he needs more comfort than I can give him.'

'You mean the child is sick?'

'On the contrary, he enjoys excellent health.'

'Than I should have imagined that a small boy would be very much at home aboard a ship.' I was still puzzled—and a little uncertain of even his mild mockery of me.

'Under normal circumstances—yes.' The man lounging so elegantly in the chair in front of me dropped his eyes and almost—if that were possible for him—looked ill at ease. 'His name is Matthew Constantine, and he embarked with me at Southampton.'

'I did not realise,' I returned, 'that you had come from England this passage.'

'I think, Miss Silverwood,' he said gently, 'that you are still in some doubt of me,' and before I could dispute this, although in some measure he was right, he held up his hand

and went on: 'therefore it would be better if I explained all the circumstances surrounding this boy.

'I purchased a vessel in England, having travelled there with a crew with which to sail her back. I had instructions that I was to bring back three passengers, the boy, his sister, and a certain Captain Harden.'

'A military officer?'

'It was not stated. But from his manner and familiarity with the sea, it seemed clear to me that he had at one time been either a naval or a merchant seaman.'

'And the boy,' I asked. 'Where was he bound for?'

'All three were bound for Constantine Cay.' Then, in reply to my questioning look: 'It is an island in the Caribbean—one of the Westward Isles, The Bahamas, you understand. Colonel Constantine has his estates there.' Raoul Fernac hesitated, and then without waiting for my obvious question went on: 'The boy Matthew is the grandson of Reddish Constantine, although I believe they have never met. But I have not been entrusted with the details of Captain Harden's connection with the family. Clearly, the boy knew and was indeed attached to him.'

'Knew?' I asked. 'Where is Captain Harden now?'

'Unfortunately he did not survive the voyage.'

'And the boy's sister?'

'She never embarked at all. I gather there was a change of plan at the last minute.'

'And so,' I mused, 'this child is all alone.'

He nodded. 'In most circumstances it would not matter, for a boy naturally amuses himself about a ship. But the absence of both the adults on whom he had expected to rely seems to have left the child with a sense of—abandonment. Added to which, I gather he did not particularly wish to leave England in the first place, and is even more reluctant to reach his destination. It occurs to me that you might prove to be the confidant he needs.'

'I see.' In the small, awkward silence that followed I looked up at him before asking: 'Are there none of your crew who are used to small boys?'

His eyes met mine calmly. 'I daresay there are. However,

at present he is a quivering jelly of a child. Left to myself I should probably attempt to beat some sort of manhood into him, but I am prepared to believe that such a course might well do more harm than good. That is why I believe that a woman's touch might help . . .'

I said gently, 'It is possible that a little common humanity might do some good. Whether from me I cannot say.' Some of my doubts about this man were returning, but I felt I had to pursue the question of the boy right to its conclusion. 'This man he seemed fond of?' I asked. 'How did he come to die?'

'He was lost overboard.'

'In a storm?'

My companion stood up abruptly and flicked his half-smoked cheroot into the shadows. 'No, Miss Silverwood, not in a storm.'

'But surely,' I protested, 'a man who you thought was an experienced sailor would not fall overboard in calm weather.'

'Agreed.'

I waited, sensing that Captain Fernac was tiring of my questions, but quite unable to control my curiosity.

'It is within the bounds of possibility that some member of my crew—who so far as I know had never set eyes on Mr. Harden before—villainously murdered the man. However, it is far more likely that he fell over the ship's rail while he was drunk—a condition to which the gentleman was somewhat prone.'

Now I turned a fiery red, realising his sarcasm was justified. I moved slightly away from him, hoping the darkness would protect me. I was angry with myself for having supposed something for which there had been no grounds.

'I'm . . . I'm sorry, Captain Fernac. I was thinking only of the boy. Should you feel I could be a worthwhile companion for him, I am at your disposal.'

He nodded briefly, as though the matter were better for being settled, and in the moment of silence that followed I heard again the low chanting of the servants somewhere out in the dark. I shivered, although the night was warm enough.

'What is it they are singing?' My companion was listening

too, with the air of one who recognised what he was hearing.

'I don't know the words . . . it's something in their own language of Africa.'

'It sounds so . . . hopeless.'

'That's not altogether surprising. It's a chant the captured slaves used to sing on the way down to the coast and on the slavers that brought them over. They were still pagan then, but if you listen you can understand where the spirituals come from.'

'But since the war there aren't slaves any more.'

Again the Creole captain raised his shoulders in the trace of a shrug. 'Call them what you will. But the payment of a few dollars a month alters very little. The law may say that you are as free as the wind, but if you have once felt the yoke round your neck . . .'

'M'sieu.'

I could not control the faint gasp as I turned to see the huge negro as still as a statue just behind us. He was dressed in the canvas breeches and singlet of a sailor and could not have been a young man, for the tight wool that covered his head was grey. For all that he came down the last few yards with the light step of a cat. In the background I glimpsed Miss Pilkington's cook, the negress everyone called Aunt Sophie, pressed against the wall, eyes wide and white, studying the newcomer as though he were some special visitor from hell.

'Ah, it is my coxswain, Malachi. You must excuse me.' Raoul Fernac said something in a language that at first I thought was French until I realised I could not understand it. The black giant replied in the same tongue. Seen at close quarters for the first time I saw that the ebony face had nothing of the servile expression of Miss Pilkington's coachman or the boys who attended her garden. Malachi must at one time have been a slave, but if it had left any mark on him he concealed it well. I could imagine him to have been a man of consequence in his own country, and certainly whatever it was he said to his captain it was with as much self-respect as

I had heard used by a British first mate when speaking to my father.

Raoul Fernac stood up. 'It seems I am needed aboard. As we sail before dawn, I suggest that if you are coming you had best come soon.'

'I shall come,' I told him, 'and I am truly grateful for your offer.'

'It is nothing.' Captain Fernac stood regarding me for a moment and I felt he was on the point of saying something more. But if so he changed his mind. Instead he bowed briefly and would have turned away had I not checked him with a question.

'I still have no means of finding you. What is the name of your ship?'

'Of course. The ship is the *Minator*. Tell your driver she is at the south pier.'

'I shall be there within an hour,' I told him.

Raoul Fernac nodded and stood back as I went up the steps in order that I might go to my room and pack. As I drew abreast of Aunt Sophie I asked her to summon the maid. The old negress had not moved from her position by the door, and it suddenly came to me that she was no longer looking at the coxswain, Malachi, but that it was on my person that her eyes rested with an expression of loathing and fear.

2

IT MUST HAVE been near ten o'clock by the time the hired carriage halted near the gangway of the *Minator*. I saw her as little more than the bulk of her timbers hauled fast against the pier, and three masts hard and bare against the sky. As I stood uncertainly on the cobbles, clutching the valise that held the sum of my possessions, it seemed a very ordinary vessel, with nothing about her to single her out from the rest of the shipping. But I could not forget the expression on Sophie's face as I passed her at the guest house, nor the swift silence with which the maid packed my bags.

'Is there anything against Captain Fernac?' I had asked Miss Pilkington, as I settled my score. But she had shaken her head and said something about coloured folks' foolishness, so there had seemed no point in taking the matter further. If there had been any cause to dread Captain Fernac or his command I guessed it was a secret the servants had not shared with their mistress.

The carriage horse moved behind me and the iron-shod wheels clattered across the stones. Remembering I had not paid the driver I called out to him, but the man only whipped up his horse and vanished behind one of the godowns that stood between myself and the road. I was still standing and staring after him when the gangway creaked and a coloured boy approached and held out his hand for my luggage. By the time I followed him on to the deck I recognised the giant form of Malachi watching me from the shadows.

'The boy, he'll show you to your quarters, ma'am.' Now that he was speaking English, his voice had the same resonant quality of his master, and I guessed they must have shared a common homeland. 'Captain says, you want anything, you say.'

'Thank you.' I followed my guide down a companionway until he pushed open a door so that I might enter a tiny cabin. Small though it was, it contained a bunk, a mahogany-doored cupboard as well as a small writing table and chair, the whole lit by a brass lantern that hung just above my head. The order of the place made me wonder if some ship's officer had surrendered his own accommodation in my favour, but when I turned to ask the boy, he had gone.

I had expected to feel strange in my surroundings, yet for some reason I did not. The companionway, the cabin, the very creaking of the planks as the ship moved slightly at her moorings had an almost overwhelming feel of familiarity, as though in some other life I had done this all before. I thought with amusement that my father's blood was stronger in me than I expected. After all I was a sailor's daughter. Probably all ships were a second home to me.

The cabin was like a furnace and my first thoughts were that I could not rest in such oppressive heat. But I reminded myself that the *Minator* had been sweltering at her moorings throughout the full heat of the sun. Once at sea, there would at least be a breeze to stir the sultry air. But I had no will to stay in my cramped quarters any longer than was necessary.

On impulse I went into the passage and stood there for a moment, for what reason I know not, but as I hesitated I heard a sound from beyond the polished wood of the door opposite. The door, like mine, was substantial, and I had to strain my ears before I was able to identify the sound as that of a child weeping. I pushed open the door and went in.

At first sight Matthew Constantine did not strike me as a particularly prepossessing boy. If he was indeed ten years old, he was small for his age, with a shock of tow-coloured hair and a snub-nosed freckled face that was swollen and blotched with tears. Yet, as I entered he did his best to compose him-

self with all the embarrassment of a boy surprised in a moment of private sorrow.

I felt a little ashamed that I should have come upon him so unannounced, so I smiled and introduced myself as lightly as I could.

'I understand we are to be fellow passengers,' I ended. 'And I hope we may also be friends.'

For a while he regarded me not so much with hostility as with the air of one arriving at a decision. Now that he had gained some control I saw he had surprising control for one so young.

'I should value your friendship, Miss Silverwood. But it would be better were you to take passage in another ship.'

'In another ship? But why?'

'I . . .' Matthew hesitated and suddenly I realised what I had previously overlooked. The boy was terrified. His lonely weeping had not been that of anger or frustration, but the agony of a soul tormented by fear and with nowhere to run for comfort.

I sat down on the small chair that was the mate of my own, sensing as I did so that for the time being he would not enlarge on his warning. Indeed it seemed for a moment unlikely that he would speak at all, for he was opening and shutting his mouth as do those who suffer from the stammer, while his whole body was suddenly shaken as though by a fever.

'Matthew . . .' I put my arms round the poor, racked little body and held it tight to my own. Perhaps had I been a mother I should have known better what to say to comfort him. As it was I calmed him as best I could until the worst of the shivering stopped and he stood beside me trembling only now and again, like an overstrung dog.

'Captain Harden is dead.' Had he wept again as he said it, I would not have been so disturbed as by the matter of fact way in which the statement was made.

'You were fond of him?' Perhaps it was not the best of questions, but I had no idea of the relationship and found myself groping in the dark of another's troubles.

'He used to visit us,' the boy said in his unnatural, tearless voice.

'Us?' I prompted.

'Mama and Trudy and me. Often.' Matthew corrected himself. 'Not when he was at sea, of course.'

'No,' I agreed, 'of course not.' So Raoul Fernac had guessed right at his being a one-time captain.

'Then Mama died and Captain Harden said that Trudy and I were to go and live with Grandpapa in the Bahamas.'

'Matthew,' I said, 'what happened to your father?'

The boy shook his head, uncomprehendingly. 'I don't want to go to my grandfather.'

'Why not?'

'Mama always said she would send me out to him if I misbehaved. She said Grandfather would beat me like he beats his slaves. She said that if his slaves run away he ties them up to the rocks for the sharks to eat. She said . . .'

I tightened my arm round his thin body. What sort of woman told such stories to her children, I wondered. I laid my face against his head. 'Hush,' I said, 'she could not have meant it.'

He turned away from me and lay back on his bunk, his face, a mask of misery, towards the wall. Here was another mystery, but I wanted to press him no more, so I went quietly back to my own quarters. If it were not that I was so caught up with Matthew's problems, I would have been worried about my own situation.

Even as I looked around me the walls of my little cabin seemed to close in on me and I felt an urge for fresh air. But before I could move, there came a swift patter of feet and a moment later Matthew threw himself into my arms, holding on to me with an almost desperate strength.

'Oh promise . . . please promise you'll stay.'

Stay? I was due to disembark at Nassau. And yet there was something in the child's fear that made it hard to abandon him. Rather than give a promise I could not keep I asked him again what had befallen his friend, Captain Harden.

The arms slackened around me.

'He died.'

I wanted to ask him *how* the man died, for I sensed that in his death lay much of Matthew's trouble. But I stopped myself, for the eyes that stared into mine were blank and unreasoning, as though something deep within his mind was mercifully forbidding the truth to come out. Just how long I stayed like that I have no means of knowing, but I think that after a time both of us slept, for I opened my eyes suddenly to a sound of activity on deck and a creaking of rigging that seemed to mean we were about to put to sea. I pulled the curtain back from the brass porthole that was let into the ship's side at the head of my bunk and found myself looking down on to the quay. I watched the mooring lines cast off and presently we began to move.

I continued to watch with interest, and as I did so there was a little stir among a group of negroes who had been standing some fifty yards further up the quay. The wind began to fill our sails and we came steadily nearer to them—men in no way different from the longshoremen who filled the ports. But as we drew abreast of this particular group they broke into a wild chant and one of their number ran forward towards the edge of the quay, holding something red and white before him. Even in the brilliant moonlight it took some time before I realised that the object was a headless chicken. It must have been newly decapitated, for the creature's wings still fluttered wildly in its death throes as the running man reached the side of the quay and held out his dreadful offering to the timbers of the ship that was sliding past him. The blood spurted out over the planks, while behind him the other men bobbed and writhed in fearful chant. What did it mean? I had no idea, save that I knew instinctively that I had witnessed an evil act, done in hate. But why, for what reason?

The chanting from the quayside grew louder and I recognised it as the same dirge I had heard in Miss Pilkington's garden. I slammed the porthole and held Matthew tight, trying to forget what I had seen, yet believing it would haunt me, waking and sleeping, until I was free of this ship and whoever it was waited me at its journey's end.

But it was possible to forget after all. Coming on deck in

the morning, with the sea curling back from the step, a vivid blue green, it was hard to feel the same overbearing sense of horror I had experienced the night before. True, I looked once, quickly, down over the side, but white foam was licking up where the chicken's blood had been. It had seemed foul and ominous at the time, but with the fresh wind humming in the shrouds, it was all too easy to pretend I had imagined the whole thing.

We know so little of what lies in store for us that I felt almost ridiculously light-hearted that first morning as I made my way forward to where Raoul Fernac leaned, much as a passenger might have done, against the ship's rail. I could see the broad back of the helmsman at the wheel, and guessed that the captain, like myself, was taking the opportunity to stretch his legs before breakfast. He saw me hesitating and walked over to my side with a quick smile of welcome.

'I have already seen the boy up and about. It would seem that you have worked wonders with him overnight. He actually smiled.'

'He seemed to have little enough to smile at,' I observed. 'From what I can gather his mother brought him up with frightening stories of his grandfather, so that now he has in reality to face a meeting—and alone . . .' Remembering, I broke off and asked, 'And what, pray, happened to the sister that was supposed to accompany him?'

'His half-sister, by all accounts.' My companion stared up at the great expanse of canvas above him with a calculating eye before giving an order in the curious language that seemed to be the common tongue on board. He saw me frowning in bewilderment and showed his white teeth in a brief laugh.

'That was Gumbo. Most of my crew are from Louisiana and half of them know nothing besides. It's the patois there. A sort of bastard French helped out with about an equal number of African words.'

'His half-sister then,' I agreed, returning to my original question. 'She was supposed to be keeping him company.'

Raoul Fernac shrugged. 'It seems the fair Trudy had no more liking for the idea of visiting Constantine Cay than her

little brother. Except that being older, she was able to do something about it. Someone told me she married. A dull fellow, I believe, but less formidable than Grandpapa.'

'The poor child,' I said, 'seems to anticipate all the fiends of hell.'

Captain Fernac glanced swiftly at me. 'It was all due to his fool of a mother.'

As we stood there in the ever brightening morning sunlight it occurred to me how strange a reaction this man had upon me. Having lived a quiet sheltered life in Bristol I was unused to the company of men, particularly personable ones like Captain Fernac. I could see he had a way with women, yet for all that I knew he saw me as nothing more than a useful companion for a small boy, I did not actually feel like a person of no consequence. I seemed to feel a warm glow as he talked to me.

I nodded and said, 'So I have gathered. Nevertheless it seems clear enough that Trudy did not relish the visit. What is he like, this ogre who terrifies little boys?'

'In truth no ogre, but I've met him only once, and that was sometime ago. We merely made a brief business arrangement. My companion was to collect the ship from Bristol, then take aboard the boy, his sister and Captain Harden and deliver them to Constantine Cay. So far as Reddish Constantine goes, he owns a plantation in the Bahamas that looks as though it's come straight out of Georgia, a prize team of slaves and a pair of legs too crippled to carry him across a room. He has a vile temper, it's true, and probably an embittered spirit. But perhaps that's what comes to any man wrecked physically.'

'And Mr. Harden?'

'Who knows? Not everyone asks a multitude of questions, Miss Silverwood. It grieves me that I should have failed to deliver the gentleman, but he is not the first man to be lost at sea, nor will he be the last.'

The irony of his comment was not lost on me and I felt colour stain my cheeks, but I saw no reason why my question should be put aside. I said quietly, 'I think Matthew knows what really happened.'

Raoul Fernac made an impatient gesture. 'I know what happened. The man got drunk and fell overboard.'

'You saw it?'

'No. I saw the man drunk. One does not have to observe everything.' He laughed suddenly. 'Truly, you would be better employed eating breakfast.'

I thought of Matthew's frightened silence, and realised my growing conviction that I could not rest until I had brought him at least some peace of mind. I felt no desire for food and the polite conversation that would go with it, but I summoned the expected smile. 'Possibly, Captain.'

'It would be enchanting were you to call me Raoul.'

'And presumptuous.' I felt myself stiffen involuntarily, knowing I was on untrodden ground. Yet I was aware once again of a sudden tingle of excitement.

Unabashed, he said easily, 'I am Creole. My people have never been lovers of formality.'

'Very well.' I hoped my voice was steady. 'If you wish it, Raoul it shall be.'

'And may I have the pleasure of escorting you below?'

I shook my head. 'Thank you. But I think it might be better if I looked to Matthew. I suspect he may not eat at all without someone to remind him.'

'As you will. The boy is fortunate in his new friend.'

Perhaps that was true, I thought as I made my way aft to where I had glimpsed a small figure hunched desolately at the foot of one of the great masts.

He greeted me with a small, hurried smile and scrambled to his feet. And it was as he did so that I saw that his position had not, as I had surmised, been one of dejection but rather of concentration. A piece of wood was gripped in one hand, and it was clear from the little heap of shavings on the deck that he had been busy with the clasp knife that lay beside him. He saw the direction of my glance and said quickly, 'I am making a ship. Look . . .'

The wood, perhaps six inches long, had already a recognisable shape, and he took up the knife again and pared firmly at what was clearly to be the stern. There was something achingly familiar about the way the small hands went about

their task, and my eyes stung suddenly as I recalled standing on just such a deck, watching with admiration while my father had whittled a piece of wood in much the same way.

'My father used to make little ships too,' I heard myself saying. 'He said it gave him pleasure during the nights on a long voyage. Some of them were very beautiful, with rigging so fine it looked like a spider's web.'

'Captain Harden showed me how to do this.' Matthew steadied the wood with his thumb and drew the blade towards it with a firm, controlled stroke that stirred my memories. It was foolish, I thought, for I knew that for a seafaring man to make model ships was a pastime almost as old as the sea itself, nevertheless I had a sudden wish that I had met this old man that Matthew had liked so much, guessing that in many things he must have been akin to my father.

'You don't want to take too much off at a time,' Matthew observed with the tone of one who quotes his teacher. He allowed a long sliver of wood to fall to the deck and my eyes followed it while my body grew suddenly cold.

'You don't want to take too much off at a time . . .' So potent were the words that I was suddenly a small girl again, visiting *The Maid of Bristol* as, on a bright summer's day, she had lain in harbour. I had sat at my father's feet that day, looking up as he had carved some toy for my pleasure, and speaking those very words. A feathery strip of wood had drifted down and I had caught it and laughed, saying I would learn to make a little ship too before he came home next time.

'Miss Silverwood . . .' Matthew was looking up at me with puzzled eyes, but I had no thought for him now. As though impelled by some power outside myself I turned away and walked back to the companionway. Out of the brilliant sunlight it seemed as dark as night below, but my footsteps did not falter as I made my way aft again, past the polished doors of the cabins to an open space where the foot of the mast made a great central column, vanishing in the deck on its way to its place against the keel. There was, I knew, a stanchion on the starboard side, and I went to it blindly.

There had been a small girl long ago who had taken her father's clasp knife unknown to him and sought out just such a piece of wood on which to practise what she had been taught. 'You don't want to take too much off at a time,' he had said, and I had gripped the knife firmly and pared off wood from the stanchion with childish concentration until my father had found me at my destructive work and chided me with laughter for causing damage to his ship.

I dragged myself back to the present. I was not on *The Maid of Bristol.* This was the *Minator,* off Florida, and we were not tied up in an English port. But even as I reached out to touch the stanchion I could see the scars I had made in the wood. They were stained over and mellowed by time, but my finger-tips could feel them with a dreadful certainty.

'I knew. I always knew.' I whispered the words as I fled back to the blinding sunlight of the deck, almost colliding with Raoul Fernac, who was himself approaching the companionway.

'For God's sake what is it? You're as white as a sheet.'

No wonder I felt at home on the *Minator.* It was no question of one ship being much like another. I had indeed stood these very decks before. 'Raoul . . .' I drew in a deep breath, fighting to keep my voice steady. 'Raoul, where did you get that compass you wear on your fob?'

His grip on my shoulders loosened and he glanced down instinctively at the little brass toy. 'This? It was given me. By Captain Harden, as a matter of fact. But why . . .'

'Tell me,' I pleaded, 'what was he like?'

'Much like any other man. Dark. Perhaps fifty-five years old.'

I said desperately, 'Please—tell me anything more about him that you remember.'

Raoul shrugged his shoulders. 'I think perhaps he had known this ship before I changed her name. There is a way a man looks at a ship, you understand. Much as he would look at a woman.'

The world seemed to swim about me. 'You changed her name?'

'My father once had a ship called the *Minator.* It is

pleasant to keep associations. Besides, I would have felt foolish commanding something called *The Maid of Bristol.*'

I stared up into my companion's dark eyes and said bleakly, '*The Maid of Bristol* was my father's ship.' All at once I felt that my legs would no longer support me.

'Sit. Put your head down!'

I sat, as directed, on a hatch cover, and after a while the world steadied. Beside me, Raoul was saying, 'Now you are imagining things. Had this been your father's ship you'd have recognised her.'

'I was on her no more than twice, many years ago. To me, his ship was like any other, and her paintwork was different then. But I have seen something that leaves me in no doubt.' With an effort I got to my feet. 'Did Mr. Harden have any cabin before he . . . fell overboard?'

'Yes.'

'I wish to see his clothes. His belongings.'

Raoul made an exclamation of impatience, but something in my expression stopped whatever comment he was about to make. Instead, he led the way down below to some sort of locker.

At first his things seemed to me to be curiously anonymous, packed, as they had been, in an unnamed, brassbound sea chest. Even that, I suppose, was something that should have meant at least something to me, and I began to realise for the first time that I had known less of the everyday things of my father than was usual, even among seafaring families. I had grown used to a man who appeared as a kind of stranger, sometimes at intervals of a year, and as a child I had somehow taken it for granted that the little things a child knows about a parent—a favourite pipe, a seal, even the male smell of an old and much worn coat—were alien to me. But as I turned over these clothes, so reverently laid out by some neat, seaman's hand, I came to the undeceivable personal things—the gold locket, with my mother's portrait within it. A snuff box of tortoise-shell that I had long saved up for that I might give it as a present. A lock of hair, neatly bound with ribbon, that with eyes clouded with tears, I recognised as my own.

Raoul had been standing silently in a corner of the cabin

as I inspected the things. I turned, saw compassion in his eyes, and in a blind, instinctive movement, stumbled towards him. He held me against him and as the tears fell, unchecked, I allowed myself to rest there as if he alone could offer me all the comfort I longed for. Was it my imagination or did his arms tighten about me? I could not tell, but I did want to believe it were so, for I seemed to be in a totally confused world of which I understood nothing any more, and which I felt a total inability to face alone. And I *was* alone now and forever, I could make no mistake about that.

'So,' he said, when I finally dried my tears and recovered something of my calm, 'it is true what you suspected. The man Harden was your father?'

I nodded without speaking. I could not look into those dark and brilliant eyes.

'And you have no idea why he should have been travelling on this ship—his ship—under another name?'

'Less, perhaps, than you,' I told him. 'You dealt with the purchase of this ship. Surely there was something . . .'

But he shook his head, and indeed I believed him. 'The vessel was in the hands of agents, and I had no reason to ask after her previous owner.'

We were back on more formal ground. Perhaps I had but imagined his need to offer me something more than comfort. At this moment I knew that, more overpowering than my grief, was my need to discover more about the father it seemed I hardly knew.

'And yet you half suspected that . . . my father had known the ship before?' I went on.

'Perhaps it is an instinct that comes from living with ships. Nothing I could explain that would sound sensible to you. And had I even been more certain there would have been nothing to make me think of him as the owner, only perhaps that he had worked or taken passage on her.'

'And the boy?' I asked him. 'How could you explain his relationship with this well-loved Mr. Harden?'

Raoul said with the nearest approach to awkwardness I had yet detected in him, 'It seems likely that he was a friend of the family.'

'A very good friend.'

'Doubtless.'

I turned to face him. 'Could it not be,' I said, speaking aloud what must have been in his mind, 'that he was more than a friend? Why should my father be a frequent visitor over the years to Matthew's mother—as well known to this child's family as to my own, save for his use of another name? And why should he bring the boy all this way under his own care to a man who seems to be feared and hated in a land hundreds of miles away?'

'Colonel Constantine is the boy's grandfather. It is possible he has plans for him.'

'I do not question who is his grandfather.' Had I known my own father better, I might well have felt differently about the matter. As it was I was conscious only of an overriding need for honesty. 'Raoul,' I said, 'I think you see the truth of this as well as I. This boy, Matthew, could be my half-brother.'

He watched me for a moment, as though gauging my own conviction. Then he said quietly, 'This is something you have no means of knowing.'

'If you were in my place, would you think otherwise?'

He hesitated, as well he might, and then nodded. 'I do not know if you are right or not. But that I should think the same—yes. Sometimes men's lives are more complex than they seem. What you have discovered must seem very terrible to you. But there would be circumstances . . .'

I felt suddenly grateful for his untoward clumsiness, and the comfort he was at least trying to give me. 'It may be,' I said, 'that sooner or later I shall find out the whole truth. But for the time being one thing is clear, Matthew has lost one half-sister through no fault of his own. Since he has found another by chance, I cannot let him feel himself abandoned a second time. Let us forget about meeting the *Trinity* at Nassau. I will stay with Matthew and take him to his grandfather at Constantine Cay.'

Had I expected agreement or approval I was disappointed, for Raoul said harshly, 'That is out of the question.'

'I cannot see why. The child is alone and terrified.'

He walked to a porthole and stared out. I could not see his expression. In the sticky heat of the cabin, with only the creaking timbers to break the silence I felt a sense of being imprisoned. I was about to say that I must go on deck when he turned back towards me.

'You understand that I can order you off at Nassau.'

'Yes,' I told him. 'Do you intend to?'

'Probably not.' Raoul smiled faintly and, I think, with a certain resignation. Then his mouth hardened as he added, 'But that does not mean you may accompany the child ashore at Constantine Cay.'

'But surely,' I protested, 'if I am to take him that far, it can make little difference if I complete the journey.'

He made a sudden gesture, part irritation and, I think part some other emotion at which I could only guess, before he said shortly, 'You must realise that I am not a free agent. Whatever sympathies I may have with you . . . or your difficult position I have no instructions to land anyone other than the three who embarked in England.'

'Only one of whom you still have on board,' I reminded him. 'And so far as relationships are concerned, you have—shall we say—mislaid one half-sister. You should count it fortunate to have found someone else to take her place.' I felt that I was getting the upper hand.

'You do not know what you are saying.'

'No,' I admitted, 'I do not. Because nobody will tell me what it is everyone fears about this place. Why, even this ship is treated as though it were cursed.'

'Now you are imagining things,' Raoul said. 'Pray go back to your cabin and rest. I will see that breakfast is brought.' The curtness was back in his voice, and our moment of closeness might never have been.

He went out without looking back, and presently I followed him. Outside the door of my own quarters, Matthew was standing waiting for me.

'I wondered where you had gone.' He tried to smile at me, but he made a poor show of it, and I put my arm round his shoulders and laughed at him instead.

'Don't be silly,' I said, 'I shan't leave you.'

It was just meant to be something comforting, said on the spur of the moment. But when I caught the look in his eyes I realised that I had made a pledge that, so far as Matthew was concerned, only death itself could break.

I suppose it was that the *Minator* did not, in fact, make port of call at Nassau that lulled me into a feeling that I was to have my way. I had learned from Malachi, standing watch one morning, that the blue smudge out to starboard was Great Bahama Island, and that, so long as the wind held, two days more should bring us to Constantine Cay.

That I had much to fill my thoughts I cannot deny. I was, at the most favourable reckoning, a young woman of no fortune, who had, within the space of two weeks lost not only my father, but my employment as well. I was, moreover, bound for some destination about which I had only the haziest knowledge, burdened with the self-imposed responsibility of a small child.

Perhaps it was simply my youth that enabled me to ignore the gloomier side of my situation, and instead to stand against the rail as the South Atlantic merged into the Caribbean, watching the strange, ever-changing colours of the shallow waters as the *Minator's* stern cut through them, and feeling the fierce heat of the sun as it broke up into a blaze of colour amid the spray. For the first time in my life I saw flying fish and would stand for hours beside Matthew, sharing his wonder at all the beauties of the sea.

I resisted the temptation to question Matthew too closely about his family, but did find increasing pleasure in his company. He was a strange, self-possessed child, in many ways older than his years and yet with a dependence on me that I found increasingly touching. Had I not felt so certain about our relationship it is possible I should not have sought it as eagerly as I did, but be that as it may, he was a warm and affectionate companion and my only bad moments were when I allowed myself to wonder what awaited him at his destination.

We never talked about his doubts about the future, because now that his trust had been placed in me, I think he had pushed his fears to one side. But one thing I never got to the

bottom of—his terror of the huge negro, Malachi. I saw it first the day after we set sail, when Matthew and I were alone on deck and Malachi came to me with a message from Raoul.

I made a move to go to my cabin, then heard the little gasp that came from Matthew. The boy was pressed against me, his whole body rigid, gazing up at Malachi with an expression I shall never forget. I don't think I have ever encountered terror like that before. I told Malachi that I would see Captain Fernac later and as the negro moved silently away I felt the gradual relaxation of Matthew's body.

'What's wrong?' I asked him gently. 'Malachi means no harm.'

'I don't like him,' he said fiercely, and that was the most I could get out of him. But I noticed that Matthew stayed close to me when Malachi was about. On the other hand, Malachi must have sensed the boy's fear, for I am certain he tried to avoid Matthew and so not put him to the test.

Strangely, it was from Malachi himself that I gleaned most information about Matthew's grandfather. I had asked him once—and in truth little expecting an answer—what sort of place Constantine Cay might be.

'You're not knowing the Old South, ma'am, the way it was before the war?'

'No, Malachi,' I said, 'I am from England. By the time I arrived out here there was peace between the states.'

Malachi raised two huge black hands in the unexpected way he had, because it was more French than Negro. 'Colonel Constantine, ma'am—well, he was a big gentleman back in the old days in Alabama. A mighty big gentleman. There weren't *no* place like the Constantine plantation. No place like Gaytons.'

'Gaytons?'

'That were the house. Three mile to the Colonel's front door, and eight thousand prime hands in the field come pickin' time.'

Well it was a world that had passed, I thought. From what I had read there were precious few of the great houses left, and those that had missed Sherman's fire and gunpowder lay

overgrown and derelict for lack of hands. 'And now,' I said, 'it is all gone.'

Malachi looked down at me with expressionless eyes. 'No, ma'm. It ain't all gone. 'Fore General Sherman come, the Colonel he up and take everything to Constantine Cay.'

I remember I had laughed at that and said, 'What—the house as well?'

'Yes ma'am. Brick by brick, stone by stone. Man, woman, chil'—he done take everything. He build a world that is gone, like the war never happened.' And then, because he must have seen the questions in my eyes, he said shortly, 'Ma'am, I got work to do.'

And so we sailed on, with brief glimpses on the horizon of islands with strange names. What kind of landfall I was expecting, I do not know. Half drugged by the sun, I was prepared to live in a kind of limbo, detached both from the cares I had left behind me and those that were still to come. Yet, when I awoke that last morning to feel the ship about me rocking at anchor and heard the dull sound of distant surf, I dressed myself in desperate haste, consumed not so much by a desire to see the truth of Constantine Cay, but also to end a period of enforced inactivity and, if necessary, to know the worst.

When I came on deck the hands were already swinging out a boat, and Raoul was standing on the quarter deck, watching the operation impassively. He gestured to me to join him, and as I did so he pointed to the low, tree-covered island that stretched half a mile off to port. Between ourselves and the shore a line of surf showed, dazzling white against the blue of the sea, apparently unbroken by any entrance to the lagoon that must have lain beyond.

'There is your island,' Raoul said. 'The port is on the far side, but we shall not be using it. Malachi knows the way through the surf, and the house is some distance beyond those trees.'

'And you will let me accompany the boy?' I did not add that I knew perfectly well that Matthew would have to be taken by force if he were to get into a boat alone with Malachi.

He nodded slowly. 'You may take him as far as the shore. After that, I think it unlikely you will be allowed to stay, in which case Malachi will bring you back. But I think you worry yourself unnecessarily. The boy will be well cared for.'

'It is not just the boy,' I told him with a show of spirit. 'My father was meant to land here too. Perhaps I can find out something of his plans for himself—even for me, for he had told me we would make our home together somewhere other than England.'

He shrugged his shoulders, as though dismissing the matter. 'There are many things that are best left the way they are. Nothing you can do will bring your father back to life. Better, perhaps, to leave his memory in peace.'

'I shall still go,' I told him. And as I spoke Matthew came on deck and ran at once to my side. I felt his small hand find mine and clutch it.

'You *are* coming with me, Judith?'

'Yes,' I assured him, 'of course.' I did my best to smile encouragingly at him. 'Come—we must collect our belongings.'

He seemed resigned enough as we made our preparations, although when the time came for us to take our place in the longboat he stiffened and pressed close to me at the sight of Malachi standing like an ebony statue in the stern. I told myself that once he had come face to face with his grandfather and seen he was no ogre, the normal high spirits of childhood would be restored again.

The longboat dropped from its davits down to the water. Then the lines were cast free and I gave a last glance upwards, to see that Raoul Fernac was standing at the rail looking down at me. I raised my hand to him and he smiled back briefly, before he turned away and was gone.

I was not often given to crying for the moon, but at that moment I wished fiercely that I had beauty, if nothing else. I wanted to see a different sort of look in the eyes of a man like Raoul Fernac.

The two seamen at the oars rowed steadily for the surf, with Malachi behind us at the tiller. At first, it still seemed to me that the line of pounding water was unbroken, but as we drew nearer I discerned a point where the sea ap-

peared to rush between two outcrops of coral, much as a river swoops over the weir. That this was the point for which we were heading there seemed little doubt, for already the speed of the longboat had increased as the current caught it, sucking it towards the entrance to the lagoon. Whereas only moments before we had been cutting our way through a sea as smooth as glass, we now leaped and rocked as the water caught us, and sudden gusts of spray flew glistening through the air. It was an experience that held more stimulation for me than fear, and all would have been safely over in a few minutes if a turtle had not risen from the sea a few bare yards beyond the sweep of the seamen's oars. It was a huge, green creature of the kind familiar enough to me in books of natural history, and its strange, parrot-like head showed for only a brief instant as it rose from the depths—endeavouring perhaps, to avoid being dashed on the coral only a short way ahead. Matthew saw the newcomer at the same time and, forgetting for a moment all his fears, gave a cry of excitement, pointing and throwing himself towards the side of the boat.

'Oh Judith—do look!'

'Stay still, boy!' I heard Malachi's deep voice shout a sudden warning from behind me, and a second later his great bulk stretched over me to hold Matthew back from the point where his weight had all at once upset the delicate balance of the boat. But at the sight of the negro reaching out for him, Matthew gave a scream of terror and made a move to escape. I saw him standing half upright, with the surf pounding behind him and threw myself towards him with hands outstretched to his. I caught at his fingers, held fast, and then the boat was no longer beneath my feet and the water rose to meet me.

I think I tried to cry out, because there was the sudden taste of salt water in my mouth. I felt the fingers I had held so tenuously torn from my grip and I snatched again before the current ripped him from me for ever. I seemed to go on crying out in my mind as the sunlight vanished and I was suddenly in a still, green world, the waves had closed over me and I thought suddenly and very clearly: *So this is the way one dies.*

—

3

BUT DEATH, IT seemed, came less easily than I had imagined. At first there had been a certain dream-like quality in sinking down through the water, almost as though I were suspended in it, borne along by it, and in some strange way so much a part of it that my body existed away from myself, beyond the everyday needs of sight and breath. Perhaps for a very few moments I had been so sure of death that I almost welcomed it. But then, as though my body had decided to live in spite of myself, I began to struggle, and with my frantic movements came the realisation of the full power of the sea.

Far from being carried gently along, I was being tumbled along like a ball as the current gripped me. While I fought briefly to free myself I was conscious of being hurled upwards in a welter of foam so that my straining lungs could gulp in a blessed draught of air before being sucked down irresistibly once more into the green depths. There was a roaring in my ears that for all I knew could have been the blood pounding in my brain or simply the crash of the surf, and then the shock of sudden, blinding pain.

I must have been flung over a ridge of coral in such a way as to almost clear it, but slight though the contact was the rough surface seemed to be tearing the flesh from my body. I must have screamed, for water choked me, and then the force of the surf sucked me down again, spinning me over and over like a doll along the bottom of the lagoon, searing me once more with a million needle points of sand and shell.

I could have met death then and welcomed it once more, and indeed I remember consciously relaxing my struggles so that it could be over more quickly. But the torment continued through what seemed a lifetime of terror until without warning all movement ceased and I fell into unconsciousness with my fingers scrabbling in dry sand.

When finally I opened my eyes I was conscious only of an agony that seemed to be consuming my back with fire. Retching with the water that had all but drowned me I could understand only dimly that I was alive and had somehow been thrown up upon some sort of beach.

'Matthew . . .' A voice totally unlike my own croaked his name, and with a reserve of strength I did not believe I possessed I struggled to my knees as I realised I was alone. I stared wildly along the dazzling scimitar of the bay that had become my refuge. A line of palms stretched into the distance, bowing their heads to a curve of blue-green sea. But of Matthew or Malachi there was no sign.

'Oh God,' I whispered. It was I who was to care for him and now he had died alone, in terror, doubtless torn to shreds on the coral I had barely escaped. If the surf had drowned the giant Malachi, what hope was there for a little boy?

Almost out of my senses with pain and despair I began to struggle to my feet, and as I did so my eyes took in something that I could swear had not been there moments earlier—bare feet standing at my side, and above them the tattered ends of cotton trousers, patched and stained. I raised my head and, only half comprehending, found that a man was staring down at me. He was white, dressed in rags, with a frayed straw hat on his head and a foolish grin on his narrow vacant face. Further back, from the ridge of palms, similar figures were running, and my head was full of vague laughter and shouting.

'Now, lookee what we all got here.' Rough hands seized me and pulled me, sagging, to my feet. I had a confused impression of ragged, ugly white men, capering and calling out around me as though I were in some tropical bedlam before I was half carried, half dragged into the shelter of the palms.

'Please!' I cried, '*please* . . .' I begged them to look for

Matthew, but none paid attention. There were rough huts roofed with palm fronds in the background, and here and there ragged women and children staring at me curiously and I knew that I called out to them for help even while I knew that I appealed in vain.

'We got something from the sea today all right.' A bigger man than the others pushed his way to the front of the crowd that had gathered and raised my head with a rough hand. His face was burned dark brown by the sun, but the coarse, brutal face that stared into mine was once again that of a white man. His eyes were blue, but there was the vacant foolish look in them that seemed common to all the others. Where in God's name was I? On a nightmare island of madmen? Then a dirty hand fondled my bare breast and for the first time it came to me that the same coral that had lacerated my back had torn almost all the clothing from my body. Wretchedly I sought to cover myself but my effort seemed to amuse those around me, for they began to crow with laughter, urging on the man who had touched me.

'Come on, now. You'll like old Sam.'

By now the terror that had been with me in the sea was nothing compared to this. I tried to turn away but the man made an angry, animal sound and pulled me back towards him. I let out a sob and shut my eyes, knowing there was to be no escape. Then there was the sound of a blow, followed by a sudden silence. I opened them again, cautiously, to see that the man who called himself Sam was falling back, rubbing his jaw.

'That'll do. Get back, the lot o' you.'

The voice came from behind me, but an instant later the speaker came into view. He was a thickset man of middle height, dressed much as the others, though his trousers and shirt were rather cleaner. He swung a heavy riding crop from one hand, gripped away from the handle which he had apparently used to strike the man Sam.

That the newcomer had some position of authority was clear, for although my tormentors snarled and muttered together like a pack of dogs they made no attempt to return the blow, but backed away towards the womenfolk and the huts.

I mumbled some words of thanks and my rescuer put his arm about me as I tried to get to my feet.

'Steady, girl.' There was the reek of rum on his breath and the face that peered down at me was as coarse and uncouth as the voice. Nevertheless the eyes that studied me, small and close-set though they were, had not the vacant look of the others. 'You'd better come and lie down. What ship be you from?'

But I was in no condition to answer questions and it needed what little remained of my strength to follow the pressure of his arm. I reeled giddily between the trees and half stumbled up the steps of a larger cabin that stood commandingly upon a small rise in the ground. There was a table in the centre of a sparsely furnished room and I leaned against it, sick and ill, my fears not completely dispersed by the timely help of this man.

'You don't want to worry about that lot down there. I'll see you right. Job Stockwell, at your service.' He made a sort of parody of a bow, and I saw his mouth move greedily as his eyes remained fixed on me. Only then did the fact return to me that I was almost unclothed, and I turned away from his hungry eyes. Was there to be no escape for me? In so doing I must have revealed my back, for I heard him catch his breath with a kind of brutish sympathy.

'The coral's made a bloody mess of you, girl.'

There was a small silence during which time he must have studied my wounds, then something smooth and cold was pushed into my unresisting hand. His thick voice spoke again, close to my ear. 'Best clean you up. Get some of this inside you first.'

I shook my head weakly. 'No!'

'For God's sake.' The bottle was snatched from me and next moment I heard liquid slopping into a cup. Then he was holding it to my mouth, tipping the fiery spirit down my throat, half choking me. I gulped desperately, heard his grunt of approval then bit back a scream as what was left of my dress was jerked away from my injured back. The thin material must have been held fast with half-dried blood, for

the sensation was as if what little I had left of skin was being peeled from my bones.

'Hold on now.' I saw the bottle raised and next moment all thought of my nakedness vanished as the raw rum bit into my wounds like molten fire. The room, which even up till then had been only a shadowy, half-comprehended thing, spun and lurched about me. What meagre strength I had found in my legs vanished utterly and in some form of semi-consciousness I felt myself being laid face downwards on a rough bed.

I must have lain there for several hours in a kind of delirium, for at times the sound of my own voice, sobbing and raving, cut through my pain-racked dreams, and when I was conscious enough to open my eyes the moon was coming up above the trees I could see through the open door. I heard Stockwell's voice shouting some kind of orders in the distance, and I tried to rise, only to fall back with a moan. There was a new shadow in the room that was darker than the rest, and I watched it with a fascinated sense of horror as it drew near. Then, without warning, the shadow spoke.

'Lie still while I lift you.'

I tried to shake my head, but knew even as I did so that whoever it was would pay no attention. Still dazed with the effects of the rum poured into me I felt less pain than I expected as strong arms plucked me up with deftness and, it seemed to me, with compassion. Then I was carried through the darkness until the voice above me said shortly; 'I'm putting you face down across my horse. It's the best I can do, for God knows you're in no condition to ride.'

I felt his hand leave my bare flesh and then the broad back of an animal was beneath me and I clung to it as though I was drowning again, crying out that I must find Matthew over and over again as the horse moved forward and bore me fainting into the hot, dark night.

* * *

When I opened my eyes again, fearfully at first in case the nightmare still threatened me, I knew only that it was light and the world had stopped turning about me. I then lay for a

long time conscious only of the comfort of the bed, until I tried to move and knew that the bruises and lacerations across my back were more than just a bad memory. Nevertheless, the fiery pain had gone, leaving me with a dull, throbbing ache that was easy enough to endure.

Strangely, I was not even curious as to where I was. It was enough that I was safe, that I had been spirited away from that dreadful place that had seemed like a brief descent into hell. I was not even drowned . . .

It was only then that I remembered Matthew, and all my smug self-satisfaction fell away and I cried out his name. I was here and he was somewhere on that coral reef, broken beyond recognition.

'Matthew, oh Matthew!'

'I'm here, Judith. I'm just beside you.'

I could not bear to open my eyes, for I knew the nightmare had returned, that I was being punished for my carelessness. He had come back to reproach me.

But then, after a long silence, when I just lay trembling, I did finally turn my head and he was there. His face, white and anxious, was within a few feet of my own.

For a few moments I just looked at him, then my eyes stung and I felt the tears begin to pour down my face. I do not know if they were tears of thankfulness or simply weakness. Perhaps a little of both. I do remember that he put his hand in mine, which was lying outside the coverlet and said in his curiously adult way, 'Please don't cry, Judith, we are both safe now.'

I smiled at him, but in my thankfulness I did not know what to say. Only then did I wonder where I was and allowed my gaze to travel past him to the tall, ceiling-high windows facing me. There was blue sky beyond them, and the fronds of palm trees, but that was all.

Slowly I took in the rest of the high, white-painted room, with its walls elegantly panelled in pale blue silk. Without moving my head, I could take in no more of the furnishings than a bureau and chest of drawers of a pattern that was unfamiliar, but of a simplicity and style that bespoke their quality. The bed in which I lay supported a canopy of four slim

posts, and I noted their delicacy compared with the solid Tudor four posters that were the only ones I could recollect having seen in England. With the sunlight slanting through the window and onto the carpet that was beyond my line of vision, the whole room gave such an impression of lightness and grace that I found myself wondering about the person who had conceived it in such a manner. It was then that the boy at my bedside said:

'We are at Gaytons, Judith.'

'Gaytons?' The name meant nothing to me.

'It's what they call my grandfather's house.'

I found that I had to shut my eyes again, the better to concentrate on his words.

'How did we come to be here?' It was an extraordinary effort to speak, and my voice sounded so small and faint that I was surprised that it could be heard at all.

'I was hardly hurt at all, Judith, and swam through some beautiful calm sea to a beach. I thought you must be with me too, but ... but then I looked about me and you weren't there. I searched up and down, calling your name, but you did not answer.' His voice broke a little. 'I truly thought you must be drowned. Then in a field I saw two black men working. They took me to a man on a horse, who brought me back here.'

It was a simple enough story, yet it told me little. There were half-remembered incidents struggling at the back of my mind. *A man on a horse.* I tried so hard to recall, but the effort only exhausted me. Instead, I said to Matthew:

'How long have you been waiting by my bed?'

'Only a little while, I said I would call them as soon as you were awake.'

'Them?'

'Lucy ... I think she's some kind of cousin. She's pretty and friendly. And there's an old black woman they call Mother Moti. She's been looking after you.'

'Perhaps,' I said slowly, 'it would be a good idea for you to call Lucy now.' It was true I had no desire for conversation, but at the same time I felt a need to see something of those

who were caring for me, also to learn what my fate was to be.

'Very well,' Matthew said. But he made no move from his place beside my bed and I knew instinctively he was hiding something.

'What is it?' I asked him gently.

For a moment he said nothing, then his words came in a rush. 'Judith, I've seen my grandfather, and . . .'

'Go on, Matthew,' I encouraged him.

'He's very fierce, but he was quite nice to me. And Judith, when they brought us here he and the others knew who I was.'

I stared at him, not understanding. 'But of course,' I said, 'Your grandfather was expecting you, was he not?'

He nodded, and I was pleased to see that he seemed to have lost some of the strange terror that had gripped him on board ship. Then, as though making up his mind, he said suddenly, 'I . . . let him . . . them all think that you were my sister.'

'Your *sister* . . .' Whatever I had expected, it had not been this.

Matthew nodded again, gazing at me appealingly. 'Please don't be angry, Judith. I *had* to say you were my sister Trudy.'

'Matthew,' I said faintly, 'that was very wrong of you. What made you say such a thing?'

The boy beside me looked discomforted. 'I did not actually *say* you were my sister at first, they just seemed to think that you were. And then later, when I was worried about you I did speak of you as my sister.'

'But why, Matthew?' I asked again. 'It would not have been difficult to correct their natural mistake.'

He seemed to be quiet for a long time. 'Because,' he said finally, 'you have no home and I wanted you to share mine.' And then, as though sensing that this was unlikely to be wholly acceptable he added with a rush of truth, 'Oh, don't you see, Judith, if I had *not* said you were my sister they would have sent you away as soon as you were well. They have little liking for strangers here.'

How had he learned that already, I wondered? But how-

ever understandable his fabrication may have been there seemed no justification for my being a party to it.

'Matthew,' I protested, 'I cannot pretend to be someone I am not.' One speaks automatically to children as to what is right and wrong, and the words were already uttered before I found myself realising that in fact I probably had as much claim to a relationship with Matthew as had Gertrude, in all save name. 'Besides,' I added weakly, 'Malachi knows well enough that I am not Trudy.'

'It's nothing to do with Malachi,' Matthew told me. There was a determination in his voice that made me look up at him with sudden attention. 'He's gone now, and we're never going to see him again. *Never.* He's probably drowned. Besides, if you go back to England what will you do?'

For a moment my resolve wavered. In his childlike way, he had sought out my weakest spot. What did life in England hold for me now? I did not even know if there would be any money due to me from my father's estate, since he had died in such curious circumstances. More than likely I should end up as a governess, or as companion to someone such as Mrs. Welling. Yet, much as I recoiled from the prospect, was it not preferable to living the life of another woman, in daily fear of being unmasked, to be driven finally from the house as an impostor?

'No,' I said, with what firmness I could muster. 'It is completely out of the question.' Then in response to the boy's anguished look I added hastily, 'But don't worry, I shall explain how I came to be here. I promise that nobody shall think any the less of you.'

Matthew said nothing, but rose silently, and with small, rigid steps, made his way to the door. I heard it open and there came the soft murmur of voices, followed by footsteps beside my bed. I steeled myself for my confrontation with Matthew's Lucy, but instead I found myself staring up into the dark, wrinkled face of an old negro woman. She must have been of some great age, for the creases in her skin extended to her bare arms and hands as though her body had shrunk within its covering. Nevertheless the eyes that studied

me from beneath the red scarf that covered her hair were bright and intelligent.

I guessed—rightly, as it turned out—that she had cared for the sick most of her life, and the arm that slid beneath my shoulders had a surprising strength, as well as the authority of one whose service cut across the bounds of colour. A slave she must have been for the greater part of her life, but a slave who commanded respect and, I suspected, even a degree of fear.

'Drink.' Her voice was far deeper than her frail-looking body would have led one to suppose, and as she placed a glass containing some pale amber liquid against my lips, it never occurred to me to do other than obey.

With memories of the medicines of childhood I had expected the draught to be bitter, but in fact it was heavy and almost cloyingly sweet. I swallowed it and shut my eyes, and as the dusty black arm slid from under my shoulders I could feel sleep coming over me irresistibly. For a moment, as if I felt suddenly afraid of the unknown, I tried to fight it, but my eyelids were unbearably heavy. Glad to give up the unequal battle, I relaxed, and my last awareness was of my weightless body drifting free, like thistledown.

I slept well, but in those strange moments between sleep and wakefulness, I was assailed by dreams that tumbled through my mind.

There was a man on a horse who spoke to me when I cried out with pain, and his hand was on my bare shoulder, holding me down ... or was it a touch of reassurance? I only know that this contact of the flesh did not fill me with fear as another had done. And then I was in a small shaded room on a blue couch and a girl with black hair was bending over me, talking to me with a soft, soothing voice ... She gave me something to drink and when she touched my back I cried out, but her touch was cool and I was like a child in her arms.

I woke suddenly, and the dream was not completely gone, but slipping quickly away like a wreath of mist that one cannot touch. The negress beside my bed seemed not to have

moved, only with her now was a slim, lightly-coloured girl of sixteen or so, who studied me with huge, wondering eyes.

The old woman said: 'You feel better now.' She spoke in a completely matter-of-fact tone and in no sense asking a question. Her voice was recognisably that of a negro, but with far less of the thickness of speech that the few coloured sailors I had heard about Bristol had led me to expect. Later, I was to discover that she was Bahamian, and that during their wanderings through the various islands of the Caribbean her ancestors had mingled their blood with half a dozen races between Haiti and Cuba. She took hold of my arm with aged fingers that nevertheless felt as if they were made of steel and commanded, 'Come. Now you sit up.'

I sat up. Miraculously, the unbearable stiffness and ache that previously had trapped my limbs had vanished and although I could still feel a sting where coral had rubbed my flesh raw, it seemed trivial enough.

'Thank you,' I said gratefully. 'I must have slept a long time.'

'Been dawn two hours gone. You sleep since noon yesterday.'

I worked it out, full of wonder that my mind was once again capable of such a task. 'But that's eighteen hours.'

'Reckon it is. Best you get up now, to get the stiffness out of your limbs. Sharon here will dress you.'

I slipped meekly out of bed, to find the girl was already busy with petticoats and a simple, pale green fine lawn dress of a shade that blended imperceptibly with the room. I could tell without touching it that it was of a quality I had never thought to wear.

The old woman saw me studying it. 'You only had that old wrap when you came.' She nodded to a pale cotton garment over the back of a chair. 'Miss Lucy say, Mother Moti, you fix my cousin up with something you reckon looks right.' I looked again at the wrap and knew that it was not mine. I could not think how I came to be wearing it. And then her other words sank into my mind. *My cousin.* I told myself that were I indeed Gertrude, then Matthew's Lucy might well be my cousin—at least by marriage—although her exact place in

the family was something about which I could not as yet even guess. I began to seek the words with which to explain what had happened, but I changed my mind before they were even uttered. They could come later, I thought. Better I explain to Lucy herself. Or to Mr. Constantine.

'Turn around.'

I turned, and felt Mother Moti's fingers at the back of my nightdress, unbuttoning and easing the filmy material from my shoulders. I was on the point of saying that I would far rather attend to the matter myself when the garment fell in folds about my ankles and my moment of embarrassment was lost by the matter-of-fact way with which the girl Sharon proceeded to pass a shift over my head. Nakedness, I saw, was of so little account that any objection on my part would have been incomprehensible, and so I surrendered myself to her ministrations.

In truth, Sharon dressed me with the deftness of a mother clothing her child, and when she indicated that I should sit before the dressing table, I obeyed without demur. I found a certain sensuous pleasure in half-closing my eyes and feeling a brush pulling its way through my hair. When at last it stopped, I stared at myself in the mirror, sensible that it was a stranger who looked back at me.

The girl had taken my hair straight back, fastening it with a single bow of black silk, and although such an arrangement could hardly have been less fashionable by the standards of the country I had just left, I had to admit that it was a way that suited me very well. For the first time I realised that I had inherited my mother's high cheekbones, and now, with the hair brushed away from them, the bones gave my whole face a character that—to me at least—had always been lacking before. Moreover, Lucy's gown was cut low over the shoulders, and although the general effect was chaste enough, it was one that would have caused high scandal in any Bristol society to which I was likely to have entry.

'You're a fine lookin' woman,' I heard the old negress say behind me, and for a moment I thought that she was mocking me, for no one had ever said as much to me before. But

the voice held no trace of mockery as it went on, 'How old are you, child?'

'Twenty-one.'

Perhaps I could well have asked her what business it was of hers, but I felt instinctively that one did not question Mother Moti. And besides, I could not find it in myself to reject questions that sprang not from idle curiosity, but from a good and warm heart.

'Why you not married yet?' her voice went on insistently. 'Ain't there no men left in your country?'

I felt the colour come into my face, but I forced myself to answer. 'I suppose,' I admitted, 'it's just that no one has come along. No one that I wanted to marry, that is.' It was a kind of lie, but I comforted myself with the thought that it was but a little one. Truth to tell, no man had ever asked for my hand, whether his suit was agreeable to me or not. In a way, perhaps I had resigned myself to the life of a single woman.

'Likely folks get to be too fussy.' Mother Moti rebuked me with evident disapproval. But I was saved from making any further comment by the opening of the door and a slim, golden-haired girl bursting into the room.

I think I shall always remember Lucy as I saw her that first time. She wore a riding habit of some material the colour of Burgundy wine, with a small froth of lace at her throat. She was bare-headed, and her hair hung heavy and unfashionably straight about her shoulders. Even so, in the patch of sunlight that streamed through the window she made me think of some fairy creature, for although she must have been the same height as I there was an extraordinary fragile grace about her, and her face, which had the fine-boned delicacy of a Dresden shepherdess, carried with it an air of something I could not place. The girl who stood before me was as lovely as a flower, yet I sensed at once that probably never in her life had her will been thwarted.

But I put that thought aside almost immediately, for her arms were outstretched to greet me, as warm a welcome as I could ever have wished for.

'Gertrude, honey, you sure enough scared us all yesterday! You feeling good again? Mother Moti says you recovered like

a field hand. When Farrel brought you back, all scratched and bleeding from the coral, I never thought to see you out of your bed so soon.'

'I'm a little stiff,' I told her, 'but it's nothing.' I found myself wishing that I had her capacity for hurling herself into a conversation—to pour out a rush of words, scarcely pausing for breath. Faced with Lucy, my newfound confidence slid away. I felt suddenly very much a member of the old world, long overdue for replacement by the quicksilver of the new. I tried again. 'It was kind of you to lend me a dress . . .'

'Lordy, but what's a dress between cousins.' She was staring at me with eyes that I noted with a start of surprise were grass green. Then she laughed. 'Cousin Gertrude. It sounds strange. But I'm glad for you to have the dress, for it can be of no account here, there's nowhere for it to be shown. If we were in Alabama now.' For a moment her eyes sparkled as if in sudden memory, then she broke off abruptly and returned to an earlier thought. 'Gertrude. I do declare that's a most unfashionable name.'

Privately I agreed with her. 'Matthew calls me Trudy.' It seemed a natural enough thing to say, and easy. Certainly easier than upsetting that moment of warmth and friendship with a girl of my own age. Until then I had not realised how much I had missed ordinary, everyday feminine companionship, and this quick, vibrant girl had plenty and to spare. It did not occur to me that in that lightly tossed remark I had totally committed myself. I was now Gertrude—Trudy—and in a moment of panic realised I did not even know my own surname. For Matthew's half-sister would surely not have taken the name Constantine when her mother remarried.

But now Lucy had thrown back her head and laughed. 'I'll not deny that it's better than Gertrude.' Then, with the instant change of thought that I was to learn was common with her, she went on: 'Mama says I'm to stay with you until you are quite recovered . . . She'd be here herself sure enough, but that she's busy . . .'

'It's kind of her to think of me at all,' I said quickly. Though in truth I wondered what tasks could be so pressing that Lucy's mother could not find time to visit someone who

was, after all, related to her by marriage. I think the girl in front of me divined what I was thinking, because she gave me a sudden glance and took up the point as readily as if it had been spoken aloud.

'I don't think Mama is fond of visiting the sick. Not even Grandfather sometimes. So you are not to feel bad about it, do you hear? And she's a busy woman, sure enough.'

'I don't feel bad about it at all,' I assured her. While I spoke my brain was quickly reasoning that Lucy's mother must probably be Colonel Constantine's daughter. Then, because it was the truth, I went on, 'After what happened to me I'm too happy just to be alive. I don't want to be any trouble to anyone. Although I would like to thank you all for looking after me so well.'

'It's Grandfather you should be thanking. This is his house, his island. There is nothing that goes on here that he does not know about. Had you been an unwelcome visitor I have no doubt he would have had you tossed back into the surf.'

Lucy was looking at me as she spoke and for a moment I found myself at a loss to understand the subtle change in her voice. Was she, too, afraid of her grandfather? And then she laughed and that in itself seemed to belong not to the vivacious girl beside me, but to someone else. Yet there was no guile in those green eyes as she went on: 'If you feel well enough, I should be glad to take you to him. He has already asked to see you this morning.'

So Grandfather must not be kept waiting. 'Of course, I should be happy to,' I told her. And why not? I was uncertain whether my curiosity outweighed my sense of apprehension, much of which I put down to over-exposure to Matthew's fears. Colonel Constantine, I told myself, was no more than a man, after all, and if he had the power to create a certain awe within his own household, this was by no means unique.

'Oh Trudy, I am glad. Let's go at once.' Like quicksilver her mood had changed yet again and it was as though her criticism of her grandfather had existed only in my imagination. She seized my arm impulsively and hurried me to the door and into the airy corridor beyond. I glimpsed the head

of a stairway to my right at the same moment that a tall negro dressed in sober black came out of a room and stood quietly for us to pass.

'Ham, have you seen the Colonel?' My guide checked herself for long enough to ask the question, although not to receive the full benefit of the answer.

'The Colonel he in the library, Miss Lucy, but . . .'

Whatever the servant had been about to say was lost as Lucy took my arm and led the way in a breathless rush down the wide sweep of the stairs. I had a momentary vision of a circular hall, with portraits looking down from the white-painted panels, and a huge chandelier that hung suspended from the uppermost ceiling, a thousand cut-glass facets reflecting the light. Then we were outside a door and my companion's hand was outstretched to open it. But at the last moment she paused. From within the room came the sound of men's voices, and although I could not make out the words, it was impossible to mistake the anger in their tones.

This seemed to take Lucy entirely by surprise, and I thought I could detect something very like dismay in her eyes. Yet she recovered herself quickly enough, although the pressure of her other hand on my arm increased noticeably.

Rather petulantly she said, 'Oh, Ham should have told me that Grandfather was occupied with one of the overseers. But we all can wait . . .'

I was not to discover where Lucy proposed waiting, for even as she spoke the door was flung open and a man came out, slamming the heavy wooden panels behind him. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with fox-red hair, dressed in a plain white shirt over breeches and riding boots, as though he had just come from the fields. He might have been midway through his thirties, but in that moment of confrontation I noticed little enough of the features of the man who stood over me. I was conscious of his anger, and of cold grey eyes that swept over and through me. His face meant nothing, for all that my eyes took in was the livid scar that stretched from the temple to the corner of his mouth, twisting it sideways, so that it gave his expression a malevolence that made me catch my breath.

I think he must have heard that small gasp, because he laughed shortly, so that his wounded face puckered into an even more savage grimace.

'Greetings, cousin. My apologies for giving you such a poor start to the day!'

I might have replied, had I been able to think of something to say. But he strode past me without a second glance, and out through the great door to where the sunlight blazed beyond. Then there came the sound of a horse's hooves that crunched wildly on gravel for a moment, beat more faintly as they reached soft turf, and were gone.

'He called me cousin,' I said, disconcerted. 'That means . . .'

'It means he's my Uncle Farrel,' Lucy told me, 'but I daresay he would be more flattered if you called him cousin.' I noticed that she too had been staring after him, but so far as I could judge, with little of a niece's affection in her eyes. Then she added in a voice that surprised me by it lack of emotion. 'The Colonel's son come home from the wars.'

So that was Farrel—the man who had brought me to Gaytons. I thought of the livid scar and shuddered in spite of myself. Not for the brief sight of an individual disfigurement, but for the pain such an affliction must have caused. There was a good deal more I would have asked about 'Cousin' Farrel, but Lucy was tugging at my arm again and I was almost dragged into the presence of the man who was master of Constantine Cay.

I do not know what I had expected Reddish Constantine to be like. I think I had taken it much for granted that he would be a large man, old in the very nature of things, but still capable of keeping a firm reign on Gaytons, this home he had recreated. Raoul had told me he was a cripple, yet somehow I had known that such was the force of his personality that it had not affected him in any major way. So when I saw him first in his wheelchair I knew that his vitality must come through some inner force rather than from the strength of his body.

My immediate impression was that in his youth Reddish Constantine must have been of remarkable stature, for now I felt the man in some way to be reduced within its giant

frame, so that he appeared to crouch in his chair, a silk shawl thrown across his knees, his massive head thrust forward like some bird of prey.

He wore a black coat of a cut that must have been high fashion when he was young and his still-thick grizzled hair could once have boasted the same fox colour he had passed on to his son. Due, I imagine, as much to a trick of nature as to confinement to the house, the old man's face was as white as bone.

Then, as I drew near Colonel Constantine for the first time, I saw that the left side of a once patrician face was dead, doubtless of the same apoplexy that had denied him the use of his legs, although the eyes that regarded me with such concentration were alive enough. Strangely for a man of his colouring they were so dark as to be almost the shade of onyx, and they glittered incongruously from so pale a face.

The room in which he received me was a curious mixture between office and gentleman's study, for the elegance of the heavy French desk and the Aubusson on which it stood had little in common with the ledgers and packets of documents that were stacked in confusion on shelves ranged in rude practicality along one wall. My host had had his chair set to one side of an open window, and I sensed that it was not by chance that the sunlight fell on anyone coming through the door, while leaving himself watchful and half-concealed beyond its rays.

'This is Trudy Marchmont, Grandfather.' Lucy's voice at my side had the same quick, breathless quality that I had noted from the start, only now it was that much more pronounced, confirming my suspicions that she was afraid of the old man in the chair. Yet people fear different things, and perhaps it had been only for me that the scarred man I had met outside his father's door had held an antagonism that had stayed with me as a chilling presence. So much so that at this first meeting I felt more pity than fear for the older man.

Lucy was prattling something about my good fortune, but Reddish Constantine made a dismissive gesture with his right hand and the girl stopped in mid-sentence. Though she smiled

at me brightly, the fleeting expression in her eyes did nothing to enhance that smile.

Touching my hand she said, 'Now, I'll leave you two to get acquainted. I just know you'll get along fine.'

'Thank you.' I smiled back at her, wishing I could say something that might in part make up for her abrupt dismissal, but she was gone before I could think of the right words.

The man in front of me snorted. 'The child's a fool. Not a brain in her head. Don't be worrying yourself about her.'

I had expected that Reddish Constantine's speech would be more laboured than that of a healthy man, but not that it would have retained for so long the softness of his native Irish brogue. I think that its very familiarity was a trap of sorts, for it offered me a sense of security that I should have done well to ignore.

I said: 'I must thank you for your hospitality. And truth to tell, Lucy has been kindness itself.'

'Hospitality?' The strange, dark eyes regarded me quizzically. 'I summoned you, miss, and you came. Now, stand over there, against the light, so that I may see you better.'

I did as I was bade and after a few moments spent in silent assessment, he remarked: 'So my late son Thomas was wrong.'

'I . . . I beg your pardon.'

'He was not very flattering about you, his stepdaughter. But I find you a personable enough young woman. You hold yourself well and you look me straight in the eye. Are *you* going to be afraid of me?'

So blunt a question almost made me falter, but I knew I had to keep my wits about me. It would be so easy to forget I was Gertrude—Trudy—the daughter of his dead son's wife. As calmly as I could, I answered, 'I do not think so. Should I have reason to be?'

He almost smiled, but not quite. And then he barked at me, 'Now—tell me about the boy.'

'He has recovered wonderfully well,' I said, relieved to be on safer ground. 'To see him now, it is hard to imagine how near he came to drowning.'

'I have seen the boy,' he said testily. For a moment the harsh mouth moved silently and for the first time I had some intimation of the labour speech was for him—a weakness to be fought down with almost every breath. As though to demonstrate his will over his body he repeated the words. 'I have seen the boy. He is well enough. I want your opinion of his character.'

Perhaps it would have been as well had I said at once that my opinion was only that of a short acquaintance, but in truth Matthew already meant so much to me, even without consideration of whatever blood ties there might be between us. Moreover, I could not help but feel that the child's future depended in some way upon my reply.

I said cautiously, 'It is natural enough that he should miss his mother . . .'

'No loss . . . no loss at all. The woman's best gone.' The old man dismissed Matthew's mother—Gertrude's—with what would have been brutality had it been intentional. As it was, he was speaking again before I could decide whether to try to defend her or not. 'Is he healthy? Intelligent? Can he stand up for himself? Tell me about his schooling. All you know.'

It was quite possible that I knew more than the real Gertrude back in England, for Matthew and I had talked for hours as we whiled away the time aboard the *Minator*. Certainly I had gained a very fair impression of his life at school, and it was readily apparent that he had a quick mind and a lively intelligence, even if he did appear lonely and withdrawn in some other ways. So, for the sake of satisfying my questioner, I recounted what little I knew, adding for good measure that on the passage over he had gained no little respect from the crew by reason of his keen questioning.

'A paragon of virtues.' The old man in the chair shot me a glance from under bushy grey brows that suggested he put little store by sisterly devotion. He turned his head with difficulty towards the window and the cluster of sun-drenched palms beyond. It was not yet oppressively hot in the room, but there was already a feeling of airlessness. With neither of us talking I noticed for the first time the insistent sound of

mosquitoes, rising and falling, as they swarmed in from outside. They were ferocious creatures that set upon my bare arms with a will, so hungry for blood that when I brushed them off their crushed bodies left red stains on my skin.

The Colonel had apparently become so used to these venomous insects that he ignored them. And since he had not suggested that I seat myself I joined him at the window, supposing that it overlooked a garden. Instead, I found myself staring out over a profusion of palm trees which, apart from a short expanse of coarse grass around the house, stretched unbroken to the sea, some half mile distant. A faint white line of distant surf indicated the reef, which probably meant that the nearer patch of vivid blue was that of a lagoon. Beyond question it was a beautiful view, but its complete lack of any life other than the small movements of the trees seemed only an extension of the isolation the colonel must have felt in this room. I wondered why he had chosen it.

'Matthew is no paragon,' I told him. 'He is much like any child of the same age. But he is healthy, with an enquiring mind. There is not, I think, anything about him of which you need be ashamed.'

'I'm glad of that.' Reddish Constantine made a sound in his throat that might have been taken for one of amusement, and I knew that he cared nothing for my opinions. Nor, I suspected, for those of anyone. But if there had been a trace of amusement in his eyes it was gone again before he added, 'I presume he is aware that he has not come all this way to divert himself, that I'll soon be expecting a man's responsibility of him.' He must have seen the doubtful expression on my face for he added brusquely, 'I'll not be handing over a life's work to someone who will throw it away.' His mouth worked for a moment. 'I want you to make that plain to him, miss.'

Thinking that I had misunderstood him, I said, 'But you already have a son. And a grown man—not a child.'

'I have no son.' I glimpsed, if only for an instant, something of the implacable will that had made the old man what he was.

'But . . . I understood that the gentleman who just left this room . . . I began. I did not finish the sentence, for Colonel

Constantine had fixed me with a look of such extraordinary malevolence that I was shocked into silence.

'Will you keep your damn . . .' The white face contracted with a sudden spasm and with a feeling of horror it came to me that by questioning him I had brought on some kind of attack. I ran to his side as he fought for breath, but he pushed me aside with one unexpectedly strong arm while with the other he seized a small bell that stood on a table at his side. It jangled only once before he dropped it, but almost at once I heard footsteps and the door was flung open to admit Lucy and an older woman.

The latter gave me a look in which was so much disapproval that I felt again a wave of guilt. Taller and of a coarser build though she was, there was no mistaking the newcomer, and if it had not been for the urgency of the moment I would have been glad of the chance to study Isobel Lavenham. Her face must at one time have enjoyed her daughter's delicacy, but it now had an unhealthy puffiness about it and cosmetics gave the skin an unnatural brightness. The sourness of her mouth I took to be on my account, though I was soon to learn that this was only its customary expression of discontent.

Foolishly, I said something about a doctor, as though such a person were as easily obtainable at Constantine Cay as in Bristol, and was treated with proper scorn for my pains.

'I can manage well enough.' Isobel glanced at Lucy, who took my arms, urging me towards the door, and I allowed myself to be led from the room like a child dismissed for bad behaviour.

'It's all right,' Lucy assured me—rather carelessly I thought as the door closed behind us. 'Mama is used to these attacks. She keeps a tincture that was made up when Grandfather was first ill. It seems to relieve him well enough.'

'It was my fault,' I said contritely. But even as I spoke the words I wondered how true they really were.

'I must go back and help Mama,' Lucy said. 'Matthew is waiting for you on the porch.' She smiled at me suddenly. 'I do declare I've never seen a child miss his sister so much.'

'He has travelled little,' I told her. 'If he seems a little lost,

I'm sure it is because of the strange surroundings. As for me ...' I tried to match my companion's lightness, but was aware I had not succeeded as I ended lamely, 'I am sure he would far rather have a brother to adventure with.'

It had been an honest enough remark, yet as I walked across the hall and out on to the porch, Matthew's welcome surprised me by its fervour. He jumped up from the chair on which he had been sitting and ran towards me, his eyes, full of mute appeal, fixed on my face. 'Oh, I thought you would never come! You haven't told them, have you?'

'Told them what?'

'About your ... your not being my sister.' His voice shrank to a whisper.

Instinctively, I put my arms round his shoulders, and then shook my head. 'No,' I said slowly, 'I haven't told anyone anything.' I think I was still a little ashamed of my deception, but consoled myself with the thought that by the act of clearing my own conscience, I might also be abandoning Matthew. In any case it was too late now to change my mind.

Matthew pulled himself free, his delight in my news so transparent that I could not help telling myself that I must have done the right thing. He tugged at my arm. 'I've been exploring, Ju ... Trudy—please come and let me show you.'

I looked down at his excited face. Tomorrow, I thought, would be time enough to face whatever it was that had to be done. For the moment I had not the heart to spoil his pleasure.

'Where are we going?' I asked lightly.

'Down to the sea. Mr. Constantine took me yesterday, while you were ill.'

I was surprised enough to say: 'Which Mr. Constantine?'

'There's only one who can walk. My Uncle Farrel. The one with the hurt face. Look we go along that path there.'

I realised that this was my first sight of the outside of this house called Gaytons and turned back, briefly, to look. I remembered that Malachi had told me that in its original setting the approach to the house had been along a driveway of no less than three miles. Seen thus, it must have been breathtaking, and even viewed from the proximity of a few bare

yards, the soaring columns that supported the entrance and the low, perfectly proportioned expanse of white painted brick beyond made a sight not easily forgotten.

For me, straight from England, it was a Georgian house, almost ludicrously out of place in an alien land. Then I remembered a plantation home I had visited in Virginia, shaded by magnolia trees and vast oaks softened by Spanish moss and flanked with lawns of Bermuda grass. By the same standards that house would have been alien too, yet in fact it had possessed a beauty that was breathtaking. It was this remote islet that was alien, I realized, and not America. Here, on Constantine Cay, Gaytons reminded me of a great ship beached high out of the water. Beautiful, but lost and waiting to go back to where it belonged.

'Trudy . . . please come.'

I followed him obediently along the sandy track that lay through the grove of palms surrounding the house, already half regretting my willingness to accompany him. The sun was rising higher in the sky now and the heat was enveloping me. In spite of the lightness of Lucy's dress I could feel my body growing damp, so that it was not long before the material was clinging to me, while an eager host of mosquitoes swarmed about my arms. How did people make their lives in such a place, I wondered. Given the opportunity, I would gladly have returned to the cool shadows of the porch we had just left, but Matthew seemed oblivious to the discomfort and I had no alternative but to follow him until the trees thinned.

It was then I stopped suddenly, blinking my eyes as the dazzling beauty of the scene made me catch my breath. The beach that stretched out round a great sapphire bay consisted of almost white sand, and it curved gently away from me, fringed with palms that bent their heads towards the mirror-like sea, while the white line of surf against the coral ridge enclosing the lagoon was now easily recognisable. The intensity of the sunlight reflected off the sand was such that I shut my eyes, and as I stood there almost blinded, my ears were full of the steady rush and stir of the trade winds through the broad fronds of the trees.

Matthew pushed me gently. 'Not that way, Trudy. I want to show you the boats first.'

Obediently I turned in the direction he was pointing, noting to my surprise that eastwards the beach projected out in a sharp spur of land that extended to the coral reef itself, and that at its extremity was a group of low wooden buildings seeming to serve as some kind of port, for the surface of the water was covered with a cluster of brightly painted boats.

'Why, they're fishing boats,' I exclaimed, thinking of the vessels that filled the fishing harbours at home.

But Matthew laughed and shook his head. 'They're sponge boats,' he informed me proudly. 'Did you know your bath sponge came from here, Trudy?'

Shaking my head I followed him with a certain curiosity across the sand and towards the distant buildings. The only other place we passed was an old beacon, raised a few feet to a position of some prominence. Matthew explained it was where they used to light the fires as a warning to passing ships.

Had we walked the same distance through the trees the heat would have been intolerable, but here in the open I found myslf cooled by the breeze off the sea. Not only that but my attendant band of mosquitoes had almost disappeared.

'Sponges always smell bad,' Matthew informed me further as we drew nearer to the quay.

I could not dispute the fact, for what had been a faint, if disagreeable odour, became an overpowering stench. I would have gone back had not curiosity urged me on. We stopped finally beside what appeared to be a newly arrived vessel, for the sponges were piled high upon her deck in a vast and reeking mass, while two ebony youths unloaded them steadily into nets and made ready to drag them ashore.

Had I been less intent on the sight I should have heard the footsteps behind me. As it was, I gave a start of surprise as someone said, 'You are about early, cousin.'

It had been too short a time past for me to mistake that voice, so I was sufficiently composed by the time I turned to face Farrel Constantine. He was standing just behind us, hands behind his back and smiling, so that the scar twisted

one side of his face into an unlovely grimace. Nevertheless I forced myself to look back at him without flinching.

'You were kind enough to show the sponge boats to Matthew,' I said quickly, trying to explain my presence. 'They made a great impression, so he was eager to bring me.'

'A barbarous enough way of earning one's bread.' Farrel Constantine took a neat leather case from his pocket and extracted a long slender cigar. Apparently as an afterthought he extended one to me. 'Your pardon, cousin. Will you join me?'

By the mocking tone of his voice I guessed he expected anger or indignation. But whatever he looked forward to I had no intention of granting it, so I smiled pleasantly enough and shook my head.

He shrugged. 'You'll learn. Only a fool is nice if he has to live among the reek of sponges.'

There was so marked an air of bitterness in his voice that I said in surprise, 'If you dislike it, why stay?'

He struck a wax vesta against his boot and lit his cheroot without hurry. Then he flicked the match away with another of his twisted smiles. 'Needs must, cousin. We all have our living to make.'

I looked back at the roof of the house, just showing above the trees. 'But surely,' I said, 'you have the plantation.' Even as I spoke, I remembered my brief but frightening conversation with his father.

Farrel Constantine turned his head to where Matthew was staring eagerly at the deck of the nearest sponge boat.

'You're wrong, cousin,' he said. '*He* has the plantation. If I behave myself, I shall have the privilege of caring for it on his behalf.' He raised his voice. 'Do you hear that, boy?'

Matthew came back to join us. Rather to my surprise he looked unmoved at the scarred face. Then Farrel took his hand. 'The last of the Constantines,' he said.

'Yes, sir.' Matthew returned dutifully.

'We shall become a devoted pair,' Farrel said. He stood there with the small hand grasped in his own, caught my eye, and laughed. Did I sense a bitterness in that laugh? For a long moment I searched those eyes until their challenge turned me away.

4

'WELL, YOUNG MASTER,' Farrel turned his full attention on his nephew, 'and where would your wishes take you now?'

Matthew, sensitive to atmosphere as always, eyed him with a little uncertainty. 'May we go out on one of the boats?'

'Why not?' From the readiness with which Farrel agreed to the request I had no means of telling whether he was merely indulging the boy or, more likely, it amused him to discommode me. My suspicions as to the latter possibility were confirmed as he glanced in my direction and added, 'That is, if your sister has no objection. I regret that a sponge boat's scent is not of the sweetest.'

In truth the dank stench of rotting vegetation made me want to turn my head away, but it seemed a weakness so I said quickly, 'No, of course I have no objection. There are worse smells around Bristol docks.'

'That I find hard to believe. But if you are willing, then by all means let the boy find out what the trade is all about.' He raised his voice and shouted something in an unknown language to the crew of the nearest vessel. There was a pause on board her as the unloading was stopped, then a short, thickset Bahamian pushed a plank across the gap between his boat and the quay, eyeing Matthew and myself with a frank curiosity that was very different from the servile detachment that seemed the chief characteristic of the one-time slaves I had seen on the mainland.

'It's no place for a lady, as you can see. But if it pleases

you . . .' Farrel gestured towards the narrow gangway, which I crossed with a feeling of pleasure in the fact that, brought up as I had been, I had no need to look down or exhibit any of the maidenly terrors that he presumably expected of me. I had scrambled around decks and explored the lower regions of ships since earliest childhood, and although the ill-kept brig bore little resemblance to the vessels to which my father had taken me there was still something reassuringly familiar about the feel of its boards beneath my feet.

As I looked about me I saw that apart from what I assumed to be a small cabin aft, the area had been cleared of everything that might hinder the packing of sponges, which were piled in an unwholesome mass on the port side. The rest of the deck was covered with sand, with lines cast down anyhow in the general slime, and at close quarters the all-pervading stench made me want to retch.

Farrel gave some instructions to the man who was apparently master, then turned back to Matthew and myself.

'There is a cabin, but I would recommend staying on deck.'

I merely nodded agreement. I was still determined that he should not see any sign of faint-heartedness in me. But in any case there was a magic in the sun and blue sky that made me eager to watch the sails as they creaked up, and to feel the first quiver of life run through the old boat as the line was cast off.

Matthew stared at the shimmering blue of the horizon. 'Where shall we be going? Shall we see them diving for sponges?'

'I've told Abel there to take us to the nearest beds. They're worked out now, but we'll send a man down to show you how the work is done.' Farrel lit another cigar and I was grateful for the clean scent of his tobacco in the otherwise reeking atmosphere. What was more, as we turned out to sea I found myself relishing the breeze that was a blissful relief from the oven-like heat on shore.

'Where do you sell your . . . catch, where would it be?' I asked not for the sake of something to say, but because I was curious to know. That much must have been clear to my guide, because he answered me straightforwardly enough.

'It used to be France, but they tell me more and more are going to England.'

'They? You mean the Bahamians?'

'No, the Greeks. Sponges were their business in the Mediterranean, so when the beds were found out here they came over and started handling them. There's an Exchange in Nassau that fixes the price and the shipping.'

'Are your sponges so much better, then?'

Farrel shook his head. 'Maybe about the same. But they are much easier to get. A Frenchman called Renouard found that out when he got himself wrecked here, about thirty years ago. You have to dive deep for Mediterranean sponges. Here, there's a shoal we call The Mud that's maybe a hundred miles long and shallow enough to hook all you want up just by leaning out from the boat.' Suddenly his voice harshened. 'But you cannot be interested in such detail. Women never are.'

Two or three flying fish hurled themselves out of the sea before my eyes and vanished again in a shower of glistening spray. They seemed so beautiful and carefree that it was hard to tell myself that they were not performing for my benefit, but in fact fleeing from some underwater predator that was pursuing them.

I had not replied to Farrel Constantine's accusation because it was something I had grown used to. My mother had more than once told me that curiosity was an unfeminine pursuit, that men disapproved of women with brains. But I still saw no reason why I should smother my interest to please this man.

But it was Matthew who asked the next question. His eyes on the cluster of masts we had left behind us, he said suddenly, 'Are all those boats yours, Uncle Farrel?'

Farrel followed the direction of his glance and nodded carelessly. 'Yes. Owned or contracted. Why do you ask?'

'If getting sponges is so easy, I wondered why people didn't work for themselves instead of someone else.'

Farrel must have been surprised at the perception behind the words and I noticed that his eyes switched to his ques-

tioner as though he were studying him for the first time. But when he answered, his tone was no less casual than before.

'A Bahamian can never work for himself because the boat beneath his feet has always been owned by some merchant in Nassau. A sponging voyage lasts perhaps six weeks, and up till now the men have gone along with a system whereby they would receive a share of the profits.' Farrel studied the nearest crew member appraisingly, as though contemplating the possibility of such a thing happening. Then he went on: 'A man became, in other words, a partner in the expedition. Do you understand?'

'Yes, I think so,' Matthew said slowly.

'Well, then when this poor benighted nigger signed his partnership agreement he's told he wants an advance on his profits. It doesn't matter if he doesn't want it—if the boss man says you want an advance, then unless you're a fool you go along with him. So you say yes, sir, you want an advance. And Mr. Selkirk, or Mr. Webb or Mr. Trott gives it you in stores, because what else in God's name are you likely to want money for?'

'And then when the voyage is over,' I said, unable to smother the impulse to join in, 'it is discovered that the share of the profit does little more than cover the cost of the stores.'

Farrel's face twisted into what passed as a smile. 'I misjudged you, cousin. Should the occasion arise, you would do well in trade. Yes, that is what used to happen.'

'It's not a trick that was invented in the Bahamas,' I went on. 'Many a British sailor has learned his lesson in the same hard way.' I stopped suddenly, sensing rather than seeing Matthew's eyes upon me. It had been a natural enough thing to say for a girl whose father had been a British shipmaster. Only for all I knew, Gertrude had never set eyes on a merchantman, let alone known stories of what it was like to serve in one. I did my best to make my voice sound natural as I went on quickly, 'At least, so I was led to believe by the ship's officers aboard the *Minator*.'

'It's likely enough.' Farrel seemed to have paid no attention to my slip. 'But be that as it may. I pay my blacks a wage,

good days and bad. They like me for that. For that and the fact that I keep them clear of the Big Hole.'

'The Big Hole? What's that?'

Farrel shrugged his shoulders. 'God knows, cousin. There's a local superstition that somewhere around here there is a hole in the bottom of the sea that goes down to the middle of the earth. It's the home of a great serpent, who every now and then takes it into his head to swallow up a ship or two.'

I laughed. 'Surely there can be no truth in that?'

Rather to my surprise, my companion did not smile. 'There's usually a grain of truth in the most outlandish beliefs. I should guess there is some freakish undersea cave where sharks linger. And for all I know under certain weather conditions the currents may play strange tricks. But to the best of my belief there are no sponges down there, and if it keeps my blacks happy to stay clear of the place, I shall do my best to oblige.' He looked out into the distance. 'Another hour . . .' but then he broke off abruptly as one of the crew shouted and pointed to something momentarily hidden by the billowing sail. With an expression of irritation my companion jumped to his feet and stared into the sun with narrowed eyes. I saw that a dingy-looking ketch was heading across our bows in the general direction of the land. She was sailing well, with water curling back from her once-white bows. Three or four of her crew were grouped forward, staring at us, while a figure in light-coloured clothing stood behind them, apparently exhorting them to some kind of action.

'Preacher man, boss.' The thickset master of our own vessel glanced back queryingly from his position at the wheel. 'You letting him in?'

'I might have guessed it would be that fool Williams.' Farrel had now forgotten our existence, and was concentrating only on the business at hand. His voice was harsh again as he said, 'Head him off, Abel.'

'Yes, suh.' I saw the Bahamian's white teeth flash in a smile as he turned to relay the orders to his crew. The wheel spun in his hands and we edged nearer to the newcomer. Clearly we were the faster of the two, and I watched the stretch of blue water between us narrow, wondering what fur-

ther action Farrel would take. Our own crew were studying their opponent with obvious amusement, rather as though it were some wretched rabbit in the process of hopelessly running from the last stook of a cornfield, well knowing he had little chance against the waiting guns.

I looked at Farrel curiously. 'Is he truly a preacher?'

'He claims to be, the drunken fool.' Farrel answered absently, his eyes fixed on the other boat. Then, ignoring me, he gave a curt demand to the helmsman. 'Bring her round a point. I'll have your black hide if he gets away.'

'He ain't getting away, captain,' the man called Abel answered equably enough, and I realised with a little chill of distaste that there was a note of anticipation in his voice. A glance to either side of me confirmed that they knew what was coming and relished it as a sport.

'What are they going to do?' Matthew said wonderingly, and clambered to the rail as if to get a closer look.

'I don't know.' One glance at Farrel was enough to tell me there would be no answer from him, for he was totally absorbed with the matter on hand. And against my will I felt admiration for the skill of the man, Abel, who was using his extra speed to intercept the other vessel precisely, without any undue manoeuvring and yet with so perfect an anticipation of the other helmsman's actions that the outcome was never in question.

Matthew moved closer to Farrel and climbed higher to get a better view. Perhaps it was the inevitable sense of helplessness that drove the man at the wheel of the ketch to make a move that in any other circumstances would have been indefensible. Over the rapidly narrowing stretch of water that lay between us I could see his face turned towards us, as though calculating his chances of escape, while behind him the white man raved into the wind. Suddenly, as though driven to desperation, the helmsman swung his wheel over and I saw the other members of his crew hurl themselves at the ropes at the same moment.

'My God, the fool's going about!' With the ability of a cat Farrel leaped for the wheel. At the same moment the boom of the ketch's mainsail swung across and the white-painted

boat veered wildly towards us. With a smaller and handier craft I guessed he might well have turned before we reached him, but as it was his action served only to bring the two vessels together in a collision course that nothing could check. I heard the helmsman behind me curse, I saw Farrel fighting with the wheel and then in a long moment that seemed to last forever I was aware of the ketch's bows lunging towards us.

I could not help closing my eyes, but in the moment of impact, which came as a crash of splintered rails, I heard another sound, a shriller sound of fear. I looked ahead of me to see that Matthew was no longer at the rail, that Farrel had a hand stretched out towards the space where he last had been standing.

'Matthew!' I screamed, then, if anything my terror rose, for I could see that the greatest danger was not so much from drowning, as from being crushed between the two boats as they rolled towards each other.

Then, from beside me—like the streak of an arrow, a man was piercing the air and entering the water not more than yards from the boy.

'Oh, hurry, hurry,' I sobbed, hardly daring to look as the two vessels swung inexorably towards each other.

In the next moment I too was thrown to the deck, spinning helplessly across the filthy planks until I landed, dazed and besmeared with the slime of decaying sponge. By the time I was upright and struggling again over the deck, someone had thrown a rope ladder over the side and Farrel was inching his way up, with Matthew clinging to his back like a half-drowned monkey.

As they were both helped the final few feet on to the deck he almost tossed the boy at me. 'Here, take him, he's in your charge. And you'll oblige me by keeping out of the way.'

Matthew seemed to have come to little harm from his wetting, and the sun would soon dry that. Fortunately he had no idea how close he had been to being crushed. As I held him tightly, sitting on a corner of the deck that was a little cleaner than the rest, we could see that the crew were reaching out with their arms in an effort to keep them apart. One tall Bahamian stood in the bows with an oar, ramming it

against our side, and our own helmsman bent down and seized the blade in his hand. I watched the muscles of his back stand out as he pulled it upwards and towards him with such a display of strength that the man holding grimly to the other end had not time to let go and was in consequence dragged overboard to the accompaniment of jeers and shouts of laughter. At Farrel's side another man picked up one of the buckets in which the decaying sponge trimmings were collected and hurled its noxious contents over the occupants.

'The Lord sees you, Farrel Constantine! God will remember you at the Day of Judgment. The fires of hell are stoked ready for you and yours. Repent while there's time, or the Almighty shall blast your house and all that dwell therein!'

The preacher's words, delivered in a voice so impassioned that it was almost a scream, rose above the shouting of the two crews. The Reverend Williams, if such indeed he was, had his hands raised in a manner that reminded me of some Old Testament prophet, an impression that came even more readily to mind by reason of his white hair and beard.

Matthew was now sitting up and smiling, delighting at what he obviously considered a real adventure. He turned to me, running his hands through hair that was already drying. 'My sister had a book at home with pictures of people in a mad house. I wasn't supposed to look, but I did, and that old man looks just like those pictures.' And when I did not respond he went on seriously, 'You mustn't worry, Trudy, I knew I'd be all right. I knew Uncle Farrel would rescue me. He's very strong, isn't he? And I expect he's a very good sailor.'

'As good as Captain Fernac?' I could not help putting the question, for an image of Raoul had come into my mind, his proud bearing and finely cut coat a strange contrast to Farrel's rough dress and even rougher manners.

I did not hear his answer, for Farrel was calling across the water again. 'Drunken old reprobate.' He was laughing silently and making no attempt to restrain his crew as they hurled whatever filthy rubbish that chanced to be at hand in the direction of the other boat. An empty bottle, thrown with only too much accuracy, struck the patriarchal figure on the

side of his head and he collapsed momentarily, only to stagger to his feet again with a trickle of blood running down his face.

'Now am I martyred for the Faith . . .'

It was too much for me and my strong sense of injustice. I ran across the deck and pulled at Farrel's arm. 'Stop them, I command you to stop them! That old man had done no harm except to be a little drunk and to want to pass on his beliefs to others . . .'

In a second the laughter had gone from his face, and he turned on me a look that was as cold and unfriendly as that first one outside his father's room.

'You *command* me, cousin? Forgive me if I am wrong, but I thought that I was in command of this boat.'

'You know quite well what I mean,' I flung at him. 'I am angry at your lack of . . . of compassion, and I did not choose my words carefully. I simply meant that he and his men do not deserve the foul abuse you are heaping on him.'

'I was,' he said in that same icy voice, 'also under the impression that the man you are so eagerly championing had been instrumental in ramming my boat.'

'Only because you forced him to.' I stood there glaring at him, wondering at the sheer arrogance of this man. Yet, as he faced me in clothes that were still wet enough to cling tightly to his body, his water-dark hair more foxlike than ever, there was not a trace of apology in his insolent stance. In the end it was I who had to turn away.

He pointed to where Matthew was watching us, round-eyed. 'Go back to your job of nursemaid, cousin. That is what you are here for, surely. Had you been fulfilling that job, the boy might never have fallen overboard.'

He dismissed me as if I were a servant too menial to notice and I heard him observe to the boat in general that his opponent would at least have the distinction of being the first man to be martyred by a rum bottle, before cupping his hands and shouting with an authority that was suddenly bereft of all humour: 'Williams, I've told you before and I'll tell you again, keep clear of Constantine Cay. If you try to

land I'll tow your boat in, flog your crew and send you back home in irons. Do you understand?'

If his words had carried or not I had no means of knowing, for the Reverend Williams had dropped out of sight amid his crew. Only the tall negro who had just scrambled back after being pulled overboard still stood in the bows, glowering at us.

'Jethro Sims, do you hear me?'

'Yessir, captain, I hear you.'

'Then you all get back where you came from. This time your boat and your hide are still in one piece. Next time it'll be different. Now get the hell out of here.'

I watched the ketch fall away. For a very little while the sponge divers watched her go, still chattering and laughing together, until at a word from Farrel, they turned back to their work and became a ship's crew again.

Farrel turned back to us at last, but his first look and his words were for Matthew. 'You were not harmed, boy?'

'No.' Matthew shook his head.

'Then remember this morning as a lesson. The sea can be a friend or an enemy. But never underestimate it. And the ship's rail is put there for the safety of the crew, not for small boys to climb upon.'

'I'm sorry,' Matthew's voice was a mere whisper.

For the first time he took in the state of my dress and realised I must have fallen. Curtly, he said, 'I presume you were not hurt?'

'No,' I informed him, 'but small thanks to you.'

It was then his eyes narrowed and his manner changed, as he said thoughtfully, 'It occurs to me, cousin, that whatever your shortcomings as nursemaid, you seem to be at home on a ship. I did not know you came from a seafaring background.'

Beside me I felt Matthew's just audible intake of breath. So Farrel had noticed my earlier slip.

'Not really,' I said as calmly as I could, 'but I did have relatives who had been to sea. I ... I enjoyed both visiting the docks and listening to the tales they told.'

Standing there, filthy and bad-smelling from the particles

of rotting vegetation that clung to me, I waited for further questions about my past, but none were coming. Instead, he said, as though we had never faced each other in fierce anger, 'I should perhaps tell you, cousin, that Preacher Williams knows perfectly well that it is forbidden for missionaries to land on this cay. It is a rule that applies not only to him, but all of his kind.'

'But why?' I tried this time to sound reasonable. 'What is so terrible about missionaries that they should be treated like lepers?'

Farrel shrugged his shoulders. 'You had best ask my father. It is his rule, not mine.'

'And those men I fell amongst?' With an involuntary shudder of horror I recalled the capering creatures into whose hands I had fallen so recently, and whose vacant faces and foolish laughter still haunted me. 'Surely,' I said, 'it seems strange that your father should go to such lengths to keep away a missionary while permitting such people to stay.'

'They were here at Smithstown when we came.' Farrel's voice was reluctant. 'I agree that they are scarcely attractive, but it would be hard to turn them off the island now.' In answer to my look of query he went on, 'They are the descendants of some of the first white people who ever graced these shores. God knows who their forebears were, deserters from the king's ships, escaped convicts and I imagine the odd pirate and pirateer, with women of their own kidney from Kingston or Port Royal. They settled here and intermarried generation after generation, until they became what they are today. They are shiftless, hopeless enough in all conscience, but for all the fright they gave you, we find them generally harmless. And it's a kind sort of land for such people, with fish and fruit for the asking. It's hard to starve. We use them as best we can and Job Stockwell handles them well enough.' Farrel swung round on me abruptly, as though putting an end to the discussion. 'I fear,' he said, 'all at Gaytons will know of our mishap by the state of your dress. I imagine in the circumstances you would rather not continue with the afternoon's diversion.'

I looked down at myself, wrinkling my nose in faint dis-

gust. 'Yes,' I replied, 'it might be better.' I was really thinking of Matthew and all the events of the afternoon.

But he deliberately misunderstood me. 'Of course.' His lip curled slightly, giving him a curiously piratical look. 'Your delicate soul rebels from our coarse horseplay.'

'And why not?' I returned. 'I knew that sponges were dirty, smelly things, but as for the rest . . .'

My voice trailed away. I really had little more to say on the subject, for I had used up all my words of criticism. Besides, anger had left Farrel too that I did not want to return in front of Matthew, and there was only amused scorn in his voice as he turned towards the helmsman and jerked his head towards the cay that still showed faintly as a yellow rim to the blue of the sea. 'It's a pity. For a while I thought that perhaps I had found at least one other member of the family who had some interest in the source of the cash that seems to be in constant demand.'

I said hotly, 'I'm not the least concerned with your money.'

Farrel turned squarely towards me, so that for once I could not ignore his twisted face. At such close quarters the effect of the scar was such that I wondered how any man could have taken such a blow and lived. And yet I felt no urge to look away. I think the fact that made the injury even more outlandish was that it was confined to the right side only, and I found it was not difficult to realise that he must have once been a man of striking looks. Now the unscarred left cheek seemed to make its owner's disfigurement even worse in contrast and in spite of my new upsurge of anger I felt compassion for anyone who had suffered so terribly.

It could not have been difficult to read my thoughts, for rather as though I had voiced the question Farrel said, 'A good backhand stroke with a cavalry sabre, cousin.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, anger turning to confusion, 'I did not mean . . .'

'To look? It is hard to do otherwise, is it not?' He watched as I thought, unseeingly, at the helmsman as he brought over the wheel and the timbers creaked as we turned back to the shore.

'It is a bad scar. There must be many worse.' I tried to turn the conversation back to a more even note.

Farrel laughed shortly. 'Meaning I make too great matter of it?'

'Perhaps,' I said.

But he shook his head. 'I came out of it lightly enough. Better than the poor devil who gave me this memento, come to that, seeing that I put a pistol bullet through his stomach immediately afterwards. No, it's not I who turn away from it.'

'Neither,' I pointed out, 'do I.'

I wondered who had, and what kind of woman it had been whose revulsion could have mattered to him all that much. But I did not allow myself to wonder for long, for in truth I was more moved by the thought of the Reverend Williams to waste much pity on what was, after all, an honourable enough war wound. The bearded preacher may not have been any great ornament to his cloth, but something must have driven him to his present state of degradation. And whatever it may have been I felt it merited something other than the cold-blooded brutality that had been meted out to the unhappy man.

Beside me, Farrel's voice forced me to collect my thoughts and return to realities.

'No,' it said, 'there I'll give you your due. But unless I'm mistaken you're just as squeamish as the rest of them. You just happen to be squeamish about other things.' He laughed shortly. 'Meanwhile you can fill in the time between now and reaching shore in composing a suitable story that will explain to young Lucy how you came to ruin her dress.'

* * *

Had I entertained any fears on that score they were quickly dispelled. Whether Mother Moti, who had whisked off my soiled clothes with disapproving looks, had used her absence to pass on the news or not I had no means of knowing, but for whatever reason Lucy's breathless entry into my room an hour later left me in no doubt that her interest in the events of the afternoon far outweighed any concern about

her dress. There were, in fact, two more slung over her arm as she threw herself down on the bed and unembarrassedly studied me as I lay luxuriating in the bath that Sharon had been ordered to prepare for me.

'Now you just tell me everything that happened.' Lucy's green eyes fell on my attendant and she said crisply, 'You can go. Leave me the towel and I'll attend to Miss Trudy myself.'

Sharon hesitated, apparently at a loss between two sets of orders. Clutching the huge towel to her thin body she shook her head. 'Mother Moti she tells me . . .'

With surprising speed Lucy got off my bed and slapped the girl's face a stinging blow with her open hand. 'You hear what I say—now get!'

'Yes Mam.' Sharon rolled startled eyes at her and fled, dropping the towel as she went.

'As Farrel would say,' Lucy remarked, careless as to whether Sharon was out of earshot, 'some of these house niggers are getting too damn uppity.' She retrieved the towel, opened it up between widespread arms. 'You want to get out now?'

I did not particularly, but found that my modesty took second place to being thought a prude. Reluctantly I got to my feet and allowed my visitor to envelop me in the towel's comforting folds.

'For mercy's sake,' Lucy demanded as she gently rubbed my back, 'what possessed you all to go out in that filthy sponge boat anyway?'

'Matthew wanted to go,' I told her. And then in all honesty, 'And I suppose I was curious to find out what it was all about.'

'And you got in the state you did? And I hear that Matthew fell overboard. My, that must have given you a fright.'

'It did,' I confessed, 'but it all happened so quickly that I hardly knew he was gone—only that Farrel was diving after him. Had it not been for his action my . . . my brother could have been crushed between two boats.'

'Well done, Uncle Farrel.' The lightness of Lucy's voice was marred by a streak of sarcasm. 'Very commendable.' She

turned those huge green eyes on me. 'A moment's hesitation, and Gaytons could have been his after all.'

I felt my whole body stiffen in horror. 'What do you mean, Lucy, what on earth are you saying?'

'Oh honey,' she rubbed me a little harder with the towel, 'you mustn't take me seriously. Sometimes, thinking of Farrel makes me open my great big mouth and say foolish things. Now, I do declare if you don't tell me right now what really happened, I'll just die.'

The innocence of Lucy's face was unmistakable. Why then, did my mouth feel dry and uncomfortable, all through the idle chattering of a silly girl? Was I seeing Farrel's hand outstretched to the rail before Matthew fell? It was of course a vain effort to save him . . . *or was it?* And how long had it been before he dived so cleanly down towards the boy—a second, thirty seconds . . . more? For a moment I was as cold as ice until, I told myself that obviously the afternoon's incident had obviously proved too much for me. I pulled myself together and told Lucy briefly of our meeting with Mr. Williams' ketch and the scene that had ensued.

'I know he was drunk,' I ended, 'and I won't deny that such conduct is disgraceful, but from what Farrel said I suspect it would not have made all that difference whether Mr. Williams had been intoxicated or not. He said something about it being done on Colonel Constantine's orders.'

Lucy shrugged. 'I suppose it was. The clergy always want to start missionary work here, and that's forbidden.'

I stared at her in bewilderment. 'But the plantation workers, surely they don't need converting?' I knew little enough about such things, but I had in some way taken it for granted that the cotton slaves had enjoyed some kind of simple Christian piety, although when they might have acquired it I had no idea.

Lucy made a gesture that indicated she had little patience with a subject that was not only beyond her, but of no interest into the bargain. 'Grandfather says they never really believe in any religion except whatever it was they had in Africa—that making them share the same God with us just causes trouble in the end.'

'You mean that he *made* his slaves pagan again?'

'Lordy, Trudy, you do ask questions don't you. But, no, he could never have done that back home—there were always too many church folks pushing their noses into other folks' business. But the island people—well, they've never been Christians. Grandfather says that once our people mix with them all we've got to do is keep missionaries away and they'll go back to their old ways, fast as you could wish.'

'But . . .' I persisted.

She sighed. 'Trudy, honey, I don't know a thing about it, and I declare I don't want to.' But she did add in a voice pitched so low that she might almost have been addressing herself. 'Anyway, I reckon if Farrel was keeping Preacher Williams away from here it was because that was the way *he* wanted it. Farrel doesn't do a thing on Constantine Cay that doesn't suit himself. He doesn't lift a finger to make the plantation the way it should be.' She walked to the window and stared out with a petulant droop of her mouth. 'Our cotton would make some of the croppers back home laugh. The house needs fixing and half the hands would be out of here to New Providence tomorrow if they could.' She turned back to me and her small face lit up with sudden memory.

'Oh, Trudy, you should have seen Gaytons the way it was in the old days, before Grandfather moved it here. We had an avenue so long—why I declare it must have been three miles all lined with oak trees. And the fields stretched as far as you could see, and so neat and tidy they looked as though they'd been fixed that very morning. Grandfather's friends would ride over in the evening and we'd have music—balls sometimes even.'

'It sounds wonderful.' And it must have been, I thought. A gracious, uncomplicated life that seemed as though it would go on for ever, and now sounded as far away and make-believe as some story out of a picture book.

'And the men were so handsome.' Lucy's eyes glowed as she dropped down on the bed again, absorbed in her childhood past. 'Do you know, Trudy, there was a boy whose father kept the place to the south of us. The McKinnis Plantation. He used to ride over most Sundays on a big chestnut his

Pa had given him. He'd got doeskin breeches and once at Thanksgiving . . .' She broke off suddenly and the light went out of her eyes. I guessed she found herself wondering just what had become of that particular young man and his chestnut horse. Was he still back there somewhere in Alabama, grubbing about among the blackened ashes of his home, or was he buried somewhere on one of those battlefields that were already shrines too—Bull Run, Shiloh, Gettysburg? Outlandish names that for me, a stranger, were no more than places to be traced on a map and now and then read about.

'I hope he's all right,' I said.

'What, Jonathan McKinnis?' Lucy laughed a little breathlessly. 'Oh, I expect he's dead long since. Or going round with a scar across his face, like Farrel.' For just a moment the light was back in her eyes. 'They were wonderful times, Trudy—wonderful, wonderful times. And they could come back again, here, if only Farrel would pay some attention to the land instead of thinking only of the prices of those filthy sponges.'

'Is his enterprise not successful then?' I said tentatively.

'Oh, it's successful enough,' she said impatiently. 'Indeed, he could well afford to do so much more here if only he cared for Gaytons. It is Grandfather who *knows* what the plantation needs, but of course Farrel will never advance enough. Mama has told me this a dozen times. That is why they quarrel. And my stepfather, Mr. Lavenham, being British, knows nothing of these matters, and the fact that he has some sort of government post leaves him little leisure for anything else.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what had happened to her own father, but I restrained myself in the nick of time, reminded that the real Gertrude would presumably have been adequately informed about the family history. So instead, I said something to the effect that it must have been hard to maintain a plantation when cotton was no longer the most important article of trade.

There was something oddly shrill in Lucy's laughter. 'You'd better question Grandfather about that. He is the one who seems to think that everything is just as it was before the

war.' Her voice changed again as she added, 'It's so sad, listening to him giving orders as though he were still the Master of Gaytons, when everyone else knows that without Farrel's money we'd be ... why, just so many poor whites, I guess.' Mercurial as ever, she jumped up suddenly and threw her arms around me, 'My, but it's wonderful that you've come. You can have no idea how dull it's been without anyone to talk to all this time.'

I felt myself warm to such spontaneous affection. She was a strange creature, I thought, so shallow and chicken-brained on the surface, yet for all her passion for society and its accompanying finery I could not but feel that her assessment of the household in which she lived was shrewd enough.

Certainly I had small reason to question Lucy's judgment throughout dinner that evening—the first occasion on which I had seen the whole family gathered together. It seemed to me an incongruously formal occasion, considering that there were no guests, but I was later to learn that it was a custom left over from the old days at Gaytons that Reddish Constantine clung to with the obstinacy that was the root of his character.

He sat at the head of the long, warm glowing mahogany table that shone with silver, eyeing us all one by one. I guessed that even the food was very much as it had been in Alabama, but I could not honestly say that I enjoyed the conch chowder, the spiced crabs and chickens, heavy with peppers and served by two not overclean young mulatto boys who probably made a poor showing against what Lucy would have called the 'house niggers' of the old slave days. It all seemed almost unbearably hot and could hardly have been less suited to the oppressive climate, but the others seemed to accept it.

I knew from that first evening that this was no ordinary family into whose midst I had been thrust. Only between Matthew and myself was there any kind of *entente* and even he was completely overawed by the stifling atmosphere of the occasion. Each one seemed to be cocooned in his or her particular shell, as if the others about him were strangers. I did not like it. I did not like it at all.

With some luck I found myself sitting next to Lucy's

stepfather, Charles Lavenham, who at least engaged me in a spirited conversation on the delights of the crabs which apparently hailed from another nearby island.

'One of the finest things we have,' he said heartily. 'The Governor said just that to me only the other day. 'I tell you, Lavenham,' he said, 'a fat Abaco crab . . .'

I listened politely and wondered if this big, bluff, red-faced man with surprisingly hairy hands was indeed as foolish as his manner suggested. His voice seemed to me to be almost aggressively English and cut across the softer tones of the south, punctuating itself with a loud laugh. When he was not talking he concentrated on his food with a ferocity that made me wonder if he had not eaten for the past week. And yet the heaviness of his build and the straining buttons of his formal coat, told a different story. Although I sensed weakness in this man, there was also kindness, although this might well have been no more than good manners. Nevertheless, when he said, 'You and I must stick together. Talk of home, sometimes, eh?' I found myself looking into his watery blue eyes and suspected that he had known, or knew even now what loneliness was, and, accordingly, was offering his friendship to me.

I saw Matthew eyeing him once or twice as if he were not certain what to make of this new 'Uncle' who talked so loudly and ate with such gusto. But there was little doubt of Farrel's opinion. He was sitting at the other end of the table from his father, silent, detached and looking, for the first time, as though he had put on his black coat and white silk shirt with at least a modicum of care. He had heard Charles Lavenham's remarks—he would have needed to be stone deaf to have missed them—and although he made no comment on them I saw a hint of the same cruel laughter that had mocked the wretched Mr. Williams in his boat.

He must have sensed my gaze, for he returned it, with a single cynical eyebrow raised, as if he knew exactly the nature of my thoughts. With heightened colour I turned away and deliberately engaged Mr. Lavenham in conversation, as if my interest in crabs were truly intense.

It was an unreal meal in a false setting, and as there were

reasons enough for it being so, there was no need for me to find it particularly disturbing. But sitting there, feeling the perspiration running down my back and soaking into the dress of fine, pale pink muslin that Lucy had lent me, I saw it through a stranger's eyes, and what I saw frightened me. Old Reddish, indomitable for all his infirmities, sullenly discontented Isobel, with what I suspected was her second failure of a husband, brittle little Lucy who prattled away mainly to her mother and, over all, Farrel's scarred face brooding over the assembly. By their very lack of love for each other they seemed to have surrendered themselves to—what? I did not know, but in the intervals of silence that fell throughout the meal I could hear instead of forced conversation the heavy, oppressive murmur of the secret night beyond the open windows, where the moonlight struck down through the fronds of the palms, like a silver blade. Once I thought I heard a cock crow, but told myself that I must have been mistaken—a mistake that the two mulatto houseboys must have made too, for I saw them exchange glances then turn aside and busy themselves with the next course.

I came to myself with a start as I realised the old man at the head of the table was addressing Matthew. For a moment I felt a ridiculously maternal fear for him, as he straightened his back and tried to face his grandfather with composure.

'It looks a fine plantation, sir, but I don't know much about cotton yet.'

I watched Reddish Constantine's ghost-like face split into the semblance of a smile.

'That's what you've come here for. To learn. When I die, it will be yours. Remember that—yours. Meantime your Uncle Farrel shall answer your questions. He'll be your teacher, Matthew, until you are old enough to conduct affairs on your own.'

At that moment I dearly wished I could have seen into the sombre recesses of Farrel's mind. Did he really not care that his inheritance was to be taken from him? But that enigmatic smile that filled me with such unease, told me nothing. He merely said, dryly, 'I warn you, young man, that though I am

a good teacher, I am also an exacting one. The standards I demand are of the highest.'

Matthew had little chance to respond, for Lucy, in a high, sharp voice, was saying from the other side of the table, 'Like the standards you demand from your sponge workers? I'm sure Matthew will learn some interesting things—*and* meet some unusual people!'

There was a moment's silence, in which I could feel the tension in the room rise. Farrel's eyes merely narrowed slightly, but Mrs. Lavenham must have murmured something to her daughter, for Lucy pouted and flounced her shoulders. There was a curious glitter in those beautiful eyes that I found almost as discomforting as Farrel's look of contempt.

Fortunately, it was growing late and I could see that Matthew's head was beginning to nod. When I suggested I might take him to bed, no one stopped me.

As soon as I had left the stifling atmosphere I began to breathe more freely. Surely we would not have to go through that kind of penance every night?

Upstairs in his room Matthew stopped in the act of undressing, his little face set into a frown. 'Did I do all right, Trudy?' he said. 'Grandfather is very difficult to please. I fear I may not learn fast enough for him. Uncle Farrel I do not mind.'

'You will learn all the better,' I assured him, 'for going at your own pace.'

'Oh, I hope so. I did not care for this evening—those hot vegetables that made my mouth hurt.'

'Nor I,' I laughed, 'but no doubt we shall grow used to them. Now, into bed with you, we can talk more in the morning. Here is Mother Moti with some water to wash your hands.'

Although he was obviously tired, he seemed reluctant to get into bed. Eventually, I had to pull the cover back and shoo him in. But in those few seconds as he started to climb in I saw the ugly brown creature nestling there, looking for all the world like a small lobster.

Matthew saw it at the same time and his eyes opened in

wonder. 'Why, look, Trudy, I think it's a crayfish.' And his hands reached out towards the thing.

Although I would never have touched it in curiosity, as a child might, I had no idea of the danger. I only knew that a black arm had come from behind and lifted Matthew right out of the way.

The creature started to scuttle away from the light it had been suddenly exposed to and I looked at Mother Moti in astonishment.

With her arms still about Matthew, the old woman's eyes met mine. When she spoke her voice was shaking. 'That's a scorpion, Miss Trudy, and a mighty big one. Chillun get stung by a fella like that, is mighty sick. Die maybe.'

5

FOR ANOTHER MOMENT or so, none of us moved. Then Matthew wriggled out of Mother Moti's arms and came to stand very close to me, never once taking his eyes off the patch in the bed where the scorpion had been. I said in an uneven voice, 'How would such a thing get into Matthew's bed, Mother Moti?'

'Lordy, Miss Trudy, I have no idea. In all my days I ain't never seen such a thing, though folks do say it happens. Seems the young master was born lucky. Now, I must find it before it finds another hiding place.'

Passing the candle to me to hold she moved across the room holding a towel. It seemed extraordinary that a woman of her age could act so quickly. She threw the cover right back and I heard the crack of the shell as she descended on her prey.

It was a very dead scorpion that she held out to us. I could only shudder and look away, but Matthew examined it curiously. 'It doesn't *look* as though it could hurt you much does it?'

I managed to hustle him off to bed at last, and then I followed him myself. At first I dozed, and then I awoke sharply, feeling the sticky heat over the room like a thick veil. I lay listening, for what I did not know at first, and then in the distance I heard the muffled sound of drums, throbbing as though to pass some urgent message. I don't know why, but the echo of it filled me with a greater fear than anything I

had known since I came to the island. I tried to shut out the sound by clasping my hands over my ears, and when at last I released them the drums had stopped and there was only a great silence. I found myself listening again. Perhaps now I expected Matthew to cry out in his sleep, but it was only I who tortured myself with what might have happened.

Breakfast at Gaytons was taken on the wide porch that extended across the full width of the house, and when I arrived there just after nine o'clock next morning, it was to find Matthew sitting composedly by himself and consuming a grilled fish that looked not unlike a large mackerel, and apparently rolled in some grain.

'You're late, Trudy,' he rebuked me. 'I've been up for hours.' He studied his plate with some satisfaction. 'You should try this, it's very good.'

'I'm sure it is,' I agreed, 'but I don't usually have much breakfast. Did you sleep all right?'

'Oh, yes, thank you . . . oh, you're thinking about that scorpion, aren't you? Honestly, I wasn't a bit afraid—at least only for just a very little moment.' He dug into the pocket of his breeches and pulled out a red kerchief. 'I'm going to keep it.'

'Put it away,' I cried more sharply than I meant. 'I do not care for such creatures. We are not in England now, you know, Matthew.'

'No,' he said, immediately subdued. Very carefully he replaced the kerchief in his pocket. 'You have not said what you want for breakfast, Trudy.'

'May I suggest you try our pineapple, Miss Trudy. We have great pride in the fruit here on Constantine Cay.' Charles Lavenham's shadow fell across us, and I looked up to meet his smile. The white shirt and breeches above riding boots were more flattering than had been the more formal garments of the night before, and as he wished me good morning I noticed that his waist was tightly encompassed with a broad black cummerbund, while even to my uncritical eye his boots were of a quality that I suspected was unobtainable outside Europe. I wondered what sort of government post he held.

'Thank you,' I replied. 'Pineapple would be delightful.'

'It should be iced, of course.' He eased himself carefully

into a chair, thereby proving what I had already suspected, that his breeches were a good deal too tight for comfort.

He signalled a servant, who promptly produced a whole pineapple, sliced then carefully reconstructed, beneath the cover of a magnificent silver dish. I served myself, remembering this was a fruit I had only tasted once before, on an occasion when my father had brought one home to Bristol after some voyage, long ago.

I said truthfully, 'I had forgotten how good pineapple tastes. But do you really have ice here, Mr. Lavenham?'

He nodded. 'Oh, yes, there is an ice-house, you understand, but we're dependent on what can be bought on New Providence—which is precious little just now.'

'I didn't know anyone had ice in a warm place like this.' Matthew looked up from his meal with a boy's ready curiosity. 'I wonder how it's made, Trudy?'

I said absently that it wasn't made, and that so far as I knew it was brought down from the northern States on the mainland each winter, tightly packed in sawdust and straw.

'A concise and perfectly correct answer.' Charles Lavenham applauded me, as he accepted a cup of jet black coffee from a young serving girl. His watery eyes found mine. 'May I ask how you came by that item of knowledge?'

'I had no precise information,' I said slowly, 'it is simply the way ice was carried to Rome in the days of the emperors, and I thought it unlikely such a method could be much improved.'

My companion nodded. 'You have a classical education, then?'

I thought back on the combination of a father whose own limited opportunities had left him with a lifelong respect for education and an enlightened schoolmistress that had left me better equipped scholastically than the majority of women. But there was a moment's hesitation before I admitted: 'Classical is perhaps to make too much of it. But I have some Latin and Greek.' Would Gertrude have learned any of these things, I wondered. It seemed doubtful if anyone on Constantine Cay would know much about her education.

'It seems the Colonel was better informed than I imagined,'

Mr. Lavenham told me. 'He asked me to tell you that he would consider it a courtesy on your part if you would undertake the lessons of Master Matthew here for one half of each day.'

'But I don't know . . .' I broke off, feeling Matthew's eyes on me, and I glanced in his direction to discover that he was looking at me with an expression that made it clear he was willing me to agree.

While I was still hesitating Mr. Lavenham glanced across to Matthew. 'What have you to say, young man? Would you be content to be tutored for a while by your sister?'

'Yes, sir.'

It was an immediate reply and I was grateful enough for it, but something still made me question this decision. 'Likes and dislikes are hardly the point,' I said. 'Surely there must be some suitable establishment he could attend on New Providence?'

Charles Lavenham nodded. 'There is a school of a kind—yes. But there is the question of time to be considered. The boy's grandfather is adamant that his books shall occupy the mornings only. The rest of the day will normally be devoted to intensive study of the plantation.'

'But he's only a child!' The protest was wrenched from me in spite of myself, and even I felt surprise at the pain in my voice.

Charles Lavenham shrugged his heavy shoulders. 'Child or not, he is to inherit. One might think that in fairness Gaytons should pass to my family since much of the running of the plantation falls to me. Or even to the Colonel's son—blackguard though I suspect him to be. But as matters are to be arranged differently, the future master of these fair acres has little enough time already if he is to learn his business. So whether you approve or not, half of each day in the classroom will have to be enough.'

I wondered if I imagined the underlying note of resentment in his voice. Yet he held a government post, so presumably was a man of some importance. And then I remembered the discontent on his wife's face. Perhaps it was for her he would like one day to rule Constantine Cay.

'Very well,' I agreed. 'Although if the Colonel feels so strongly about the matter, I should have thought he might well have consulted me in person instead . . .' I hesitated.

'Instead of passing on the message by means of an errand boy?' He gave a great bellow of laughter. 'My dear young woman, that's the way things are done here and you'd do well to get used to the idea.'

'It seems,' I said primly, 'that the matter was settled before I even knew of its existence. So I don't imagine anything I say will affect anything one way or the other.'

His small eyes creased with laughter. 'Won't matter a damn, so put a smile on it, eh?' Then, as Matthew wandered away Charles Lavenham's voice dropped. 'Heard there was a scorpion in the boy's bed last night. Must have given you both a nasty shock. Can't say I remember the last time I saw one inside Gaytons. Scorpions don't like humans. Chance in a million of it happening again.'

The cold feeling returned to me. I could only hope accidents did not happen in threes. Unbidden, Farrel's sardonic face came into my mind. I closed my eyes, shutting it out. Farrel was the boy's friend. There was a genuine entente between them. But I vowed I would stay as near Matthew as I could, without letting him think I was smothering him. I wanted to ask about the drums, but in the hot bright sun, my night fears on that score seemed only a dream.

Charles Lavenham said: 'By the way I heard in Nassau they were asking after you from the ship you and the boy came on. The coxswain . . .'

'A big giant of a negro?' I put in eagerly.

'I believe so. He was asking on behalf of the captain.'

So Malachi had been saved too. I was glad. And then I smiled inwardly. So Raoul had not forgotten me either.

Charles Lavenham hauled himself to his feet. 'Well, I must make a start with showing the boy his future responsibilities. He can't see twelve thousand acres in a morning, but he can make a start. I only wish there was something here for him to be proud of. Come, young man,' he called.

I looked at Matthew, uncertain as to whether I was supposed to accompany him or not. But, with a quickness for

which I had not given him credit, Mr. Lavenham read my thoughts and shook his head. 'No, madam, we'll do well enough on our own. The boy must learn to stand on his own feet. But if you care for a breather about noon you can meet us at the gin . . . that's the mill . . . four miles along the south road. I'll leave word with Jackson, in the stables, to find you something to ride.' He pushed his coffee cup away from him with an air of finality. 'I presume you do ride?'

'My clothes are hardly suitable.' But it was a half-hearted excuse.

'Isobel or Lucy can see to that, providing you're safe on a horse.'

For the second time that day I found myself thinking gratefully of Miss Webster's Academy. It was true her equestrian instruction had been somewhat sketchily carried out at the nearby livery stables, more, I imagined, with an aim to commanding supplementary fees than with any real intention of turning out competent horsewomen. But, rudimentary though my knowledge was, I was relieved to be able to answer Charles's brusque query with equal brevity.

'I'm safe enough.'

His small eyes studied me quizzically, and I had no means of knowing whether my answer had surprised him or not. It was possible that there was more to Isobel's husband than one might at first judge from his air of a bluff and brainless Englishman; a thought that I broached tentatively with Lucy when, half an hour later, I was in her room selecting a suitable habit.

'I should have expected Mr. Lavenham to be too fully occupied with his official duties to have time to show Matthew round the plantation.'

'Oh—Charles and his government business.' Lucy, curled up on her tall poster bed, eyeing herself in the mirror, spoke with mild contempt. 'Anyone would think that everything on the islands would stop if it were not for him. But I'm told the governor himself is not in his office more than twice a week, so there is plenty of time to make believe he's as good a planter as the next man.'

'Does he know anything of the work?'

Lucy pulled a face. 'Little enough. He grew sugar on Jamaica before he met Mama. Unsuccessfully, I'm told.' She stretched herself like a small cat. 'I declare that habit suits you better than it does me. You may keep it, if you like.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that I didn't need it when the truth came to me that I needed not only this habit of fine, bottle-green merino, but almost everything else as well. My few clothes and what little money I had taken with me on board the *Minator* were now somewhere on the sea bed.

'Thank you, Lucy,' I said, 'but I can't go on depending on your generosity for the clothes I wear. I must get some of my own.'

'There's the trading store at Captain's Harbour. I'm told the calico that's sold there is much in demand by the blacks' women.' There was a wicked glint in Lucy's eye as she watched my reaction to this information. 'But I fear that's all you'll find on Constantine Cay. Even if you have some skill with the needle yourself, you'll not find any materials nearer than Bay Street, in Nassau.'

It was much as I had guessed, but I must have showed my despair as I asked how far that might be.

'Four or five hours' sailing—little more. One can take passage on the mail boat that calls once a week. And we've a ketch that Charles uses when he feels that the government needs his services.' Lucy's eyes suddenly opened wide. 'But we could make an expedition together you and I! It's an age since I visited, and there are a hundred things I need.'

'There are a hundred things I need also,' I informed her a little shortly, 'but there is a difficulty that will first have to be resolved. I have no money.'

'Well, so far as that's concerned, you're no worse off than the rest of us.' Lucy tossed her head and I guessed that she had been waiting for the chance to say those very words. 'So you'll have to do as Mama and I do.'

'And what is that?'

'Why, pocket your pride and go cap in hand to Farrel.'

When she saw the dismay I so obviously showed, she gave a little laugh. 'Charles says that before the war Grandfather

used to make sixty thousand dollars a year from the turpentine trees alone. And now he's no better off than the rest of us. There's hardly money to plant our next year's crops and the house, due to lack of repairs, is just falling to pieces over our heads while Farrel is making himself rich from his loathsome sponges. He could make Mama a proper allowance without noticing he's even spent the money, but it's my opinion he *likes* to humiliate her. He knows Grandfather will never leave the property to him, no matter what happens, so he takes his revenge on us all. And now . . .' Lucy broke off and jumped off the bed. Her face was pale and I could not help noticing that her body was shaking with the force of her emotion. 'Well, ask for yourself, and see how it feels to be a beggar.'

I stood there, feeling at a loss in the face of the outburst I had unwittingly provoked. That Lucy should dislike the necessity for asking Farrel for money was natural enough, but there was something almost unnatural about the force of her resentment. What was it about this seeming paradise of an island that seemed to destroy the men and women who lived on it? It was as if behind the beauty there was some kind of poison, as though the blue sea, white sand and palms had banded together to dazzle the unwary, so that they stayed and hoped not realising their surroundings would destroy them in the end.

Forcing myself to speak lightly, I said, 'I have wondered about the bitterness between your grandfather and Farrel. Why Colonel Constantine should wish to disinherit his only son . . .'

When Lucy looked at me it was with that oddly blank, shuttered look I had glimpsed before, as if she had suddenly moved on to another plane. Then she shrugged and said merely, 'He has his reasons,' and I knew I would get no further. So instead I said:

'I suppose if Farrel makes the greater part of the family income he thinks himself entitled to a say in the spending of it. If it is customary to ask him for funds, then that is what I must do.'

'You will not mind?' she said curiously.

'Mind?' I tried not to let myself stiffen, for everything in me rebelled against the necessity for asking favours of anyone. 'Of course I shall mind,' I told her shortly. 'But we are, after all, of one family and my circumstances being what they are I suppose it is inevitable that I am beholden to someone. I wish I could raise the matter with your grandfather, as head of the household, but I might only embarrass him. It is only of Matthew I must think, for Matthew needs me here as an anchor line.'

'Yes,' she said obliquely, 'I think he does need you.'

I did not know what she meant, but as I could see she was already losing interest in our conversation I moved towards the door. 'Perhaps,' I said, 'I will see Farrel at luncheon.'

'I doubt it. He seldom returns until the evening.'

I stopped. 'He has some office then?' I did not want to return to the harbour.

She shrugged. 'There's a house almost on the beach, just this side of the point' She did not look at me as she went on: 'I understand Farrel may be found there often enough. And if you are riding to the gin there's no mistaking the track. You pick it up at the old pineapple plantation. There's a shack there that used to be a little shop, but it's empty now. Like everything else. They say . . .' The words slid away and a sly expression came into Lucy's eyes.

'What do they say?'

'Nothing. It is merely island gossip. But Farrel makes his own rules.'

It was just by chance that I returned to my room unexpectedly, before setting out for the gin. I had already turned the handle of the door before I saw the object pinned to it, swinging gently in the draught of air I had caused.

At first glance the crude little doll seemed ordinary enough with its rough sisal body and straggling hair. But then I saw that the hair was red, like my own, and the painted face had an expression that was full of malevolence. There was something vile about the thing and I tore it quickly down. Perhaps I should have thrown it away then, but something made me want to find out its purpose. I could not help but be reminded of the tales I had heard in Bristol how in the old days of

witchcraft a waxen image would be made of a person to whom harm was intended ... But who, I thought would intend me harm? No, I was being foolish after a poor night's sleep. Nevertheless, I put the thing carefully away.

When, a short while later I headed the sorrel mare down the long white road that led south from Gaytons, I tried to put the ugly little incident from my mind. I succeeded in this, and instead Lucy's words, her half hints returned to me. I had no idea whether she was trying to warn me, or whether her natural pique at her own position made her say foolish things. But then, as the mare broke into a canter, the sights and sounds of the plantation drove everything else from my mind.

In a strange way it is common for even seasoned travellers to form a mental impression of places and then to note with dismay that the reality in no way matches the pictures the mind has conjured up. So, at first, it was with me at Gaytons.

Once, in those seemingly far-off days when I had been accompanying Mrs. Welling, I had briefly visited a plantation, and that had been in the lush green of Carolina, where the endless rows of cotton plants were being tended by scores of one-time slaves. For one brought up with the conviction that the fruits of slavery must inevitably be bad, I had been surprised both by the prosperity of the place and the obvious well-being of the workers. As a way of life it may have been archaic, yet the sense of plenty and a kind of benevolence in its dictatorship had made an impression on me that had done much to counteract what I had heard and read from its opponents.

I think I had expected Gaytons to be much the same, but with every yard I travelled it became only too clear that it was not. From the edge of the sea, Constantine Cay was a place of flawless beauty, an enchantment of blue water and pink sand that was as unspoiled and peaceful as it had been on the day the world began. But once out of sight of the sea it was easy enough to understand that in spite of its apparent richness the red earth lay woefully thin on its bed of coral, so that even someone as little informed as myself could realise

the stunted, dried rows of cotton plants that stretched as far as I could see were starved for lack of nourishment.

In Carolina, it had seemed as though every acre of field had its own outcrop of trees that broke up the landscape into light and shade, but as I rode through the savage heat of the noon at Gaytons I could well have been crossing an alien planet. The crop was not yet dead, but I felt instinctively that it might as well have been for all it was likely to produce. And as the mare's hooves raised the dust behind me I could imagine it settling on the leaves and the miserable clothes of the few workers who shuffled between the rows, their heads down.

The heat was beginning to press down unbearably and I slowed down to a walk, I tried to wipe away the perspiration from my face and then anchored the cream straw hat firmly on my head, wishing that it offered a little more shade. I had reached a field planted with a black-spined, cactus-like plant that was totally strange to me, when two men leaned on their hoes and looked up as I passed. Their eyes met mine and I felt a chill in spite of the terrible heat.

I do not know what I expected. I suppose, in the too-casual way with which we accept such inequalities, that I should not have been much moved if in that fleeting moment I had seen a kind of dumb incomprehension, or the not undignified servility of the one-time slave. What I was not prepared for was the flash of naked hatred that blazed up at me from the dark faces. I caught my breath, knowing I was utterly alone out here, but in a moment they were behind me and when I looked back over my shoulder both figures were bent over their work once more, as though the incident were already forgotten. Nevertheless, I urged the mare into a trot again.

I don't know why I felt disturbed as I did. I was reminded most brutally of those alien sounds of the night. When the big, square shape of the gin came in sight ahead of me I discovered that my hands were still shaking, so it was with a great deal of relief that I saw Mr. Lavenham, with Matthew's small figure beside him.

They were standing in front of a row of ill-made shacks

that I learned later were living quarters for the field hands. With them was another man.

'Trudy,' said Mr. Lavenham, 'this is Mr. Stockwell. He's our foreman in the sisal fields. He comes from England,' he added.

I looked at the coarse heavy face and bold eyes that stared back at me and was in an instant transported back to those moments of nameless terror when I had first landed at Constantine Cay. This man Stockwell had been a part of it. Instinctively, I moved a step closer to Mr. Lavenham.

There seemed to be the suggestion of a leer on the face that continued to stare at me.

'Aye, Job Stockwell, from Preston—though a few years back I can tell you.' He paused. 'And Miss Trudy and I have already met.'

In a flash I saw those villainous faces all crowding round me, then heard the crude bellowing voice shout something obscene and the crowd scattered. I must have opened my eyes briefly to see this very face looking down on me and it had seemed at the time to be not much better than the rest. I could even summon up the awful smell of rum on his breath. It was he who had been my first 'deliverer' at Smithstown—that village of the damned.

But now, although Job Stockwell was outwardly polite, there was something ... something *knowing* in the curl of those ugly lips, in the gleam of the eyes. Instinctively, I pulled my light cotton shawl more closely about me and the knowledge came to me in sickening fashion. The clothes had been almost ripped from my back by the force of the coral. Had I not been loaned a silky wrap by a girl whose dark beauty seemed to be a distant memory? In that case this man Stockwell ... no wonder the expression in those eyes offered a lewd memory of what he had seen. He saw my unconscious movement to cover myself now and his smile grew sly. I longed to turn tail and run, but Mr. Lavenham was already talking in his bluff way.

'Ah, yes, of course, Job Stockwell here lent a hand in your rescue, Trudy.'

'Of that I am grateful, deeply grateful,' I said in my chill-

iest voice. I turned quickly from them both and asked Matthew what he had seen of the plantation.

'Oh, a great deal, Trudy,' he answered in a curiously adult way. 'But there's lots more to see. It isn't just cotton, you know. There's sisal and pineapples and oranges besides. And now,' he added with a new note of interest, 'we are to go round the cotton gin. That's the name they give the mill here,' he explained kindly. 'You'll come as well, won't you Trudy?'

'Aye, she'll come,' Stockwell said, giving me that same bold look that made me want to shrink away from the nightmare memory. He raised his hand to push the broad-brimmed hat back from his glistening forehead and I saw that he carried a ship's anchor tattooed on his arm. He must have seen the direction of my glance, for he grinned and held it up better for me to see. Somehow, I wanted to turn away but could not. 'From th' old days when I were a sailor. Before I took to driving blacks. They'll tell you round here that there's nought like a sailor *and* a man from the old country for making the hands jump.'

Mr. Lavenham said a little primly, 'Stockwell has an enviable reputation. Sometimes I think he is not altogether as new to the work as he makes out.'

The man in front of me gave a short laugh. 'Oh, aye, I've sailed wi' slavers in my time. When I was a lad. I reckon I learned the trick of handling that sort of cargo.'

I shuddered at the thought of this man's pride in knowing a once-evil trade, and it occurred to me that he was a man who had enjoyed his own brutal way for the whole of his life, and that even now he could overshadow Charles Lavenham's mannered ineffectuality with contemptuous ease.

A field hand shuffled past and bobbed his head deferentially, and I noticed it was to Stockwell he looked. And yet in the negro's face there was none of the hate I had sensed only a short time before. Stockwell might overwork or starve or flog the men under him and be rewarded simply with a cowed submission in return. Hatred seemed to be reserved possibly, for those in the big house.

'Well, then, are you coming wi' me to see round the gin?'

'Another time,' I said, trying to control my voice over the repugnance I felt for this man.

Stockwell's leer became a little more pronounced. 'It's a long while since I spoke to a girl from home. Come an' see the place while you've got the chance . . .'

I wheeled the mare sharply. 'I'm sorry, but I have to see Mr. Farrel—Captain Constantine. Perhaps you could tell me where I could find him.'

For just a second anger clouded his eyes, then he shrugged his shoulders. 'He could be anywhere.'

I was perfectly certain that he knew Farrel's whereabouts well enough, and for some reason of his own wanted to keep that knowledge to himself. So I said brusquely, 'I understand that there is some sort of house by the sea where he is usually to be found about this time of day. I would like to know how to get there.'

I tried to match that bold unpleasant stare unwaveringly. It was no use to let a man like this sense my fear of him. With legs astride, he planted his big, thickset body with its dirty yellow shirt, in front of me.

'As you wish.' He gestured towards the track that wound its way past the gin and into the thickly wooded area beyond. 'Follow that as far as you can go. The house is hard by the beach, under the trees.'

I merely nodded my thanks, then urged the mare forward so that he had to step aside sharply. As I swept past him I saw his hand go to his hat in a kind of mocking salute, as if he rather liked the way we had both made our positions perfectly clear. Only when I had cantered away from the huddle of buildings and down the track to where the palms thinned and the red dust gave way to silver sand, did I stop for a moment. I put my hands to my burning cheeks and hoped that the hammering of my heart would soon die down. The encounter would have been unpleasant anyway, but that I should still feel this unreasoning fear made it doubly worse. I suppose I should have thanked him more fully, for he *had* in his way been responsible for my rescue, but I dared not think what might have happened had not Farrel plucked me

out of that dreadful place before I had regained full consciousness again.

Putting the memory of Job Stockwell firmly behind me I rode for perhaps a mile, then reined in the mare again as my ears picked up the murmur of the distant surf. At first glance it seemed to me that the beach was utterly deserted, with no trace of a building in sight. Then I saw that there was, in fact, a house standing back among the trees at right angles to me, with its verandah facing the ocean.

I walked my mount forward, seeing now that the front was white-painted and well kept, in marked contrast to Gaytons' seedy grandeur. For a moment I thought that someone had actually planned a garden, until I realised that the hibiscus that blazed in crimson glory on either side of the door were wild, as were the poinsettias and bougainvillaea that framed the house against the shadow of the palms. Wild they may have been, but they must have been planted there at some time, for there were no other flowering trees that I could see anywhere else on the empty beach.

It was a strange quirk of character, I thought, that could lead a man like Farrel Constantine to keep himself a place so obviously cherished while regarding his ancestral home with ill-concealed contempt. Was he ashamed of having a softer side to his character, or was it just another way of demonstrating to his family that he simply did not care.

'Farrel,' I called, 'are you there?'

Someone moved in the shadows around the doorway, and I kicked my foot free of the stirrup iron and slipped to the ground, gathering up the reins as I did so. When next I looked up I saw that it was not Farrel who was watching me from the verandah, but a woman.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I thought . . .' In truth, I was not sure what I thought, save perhaps that she was exceptionally beautiful, a tall woman who could have been of any age between twenty and thirty, her skin like melted honey. She was wearing a single garment of flame-coloured silk wrapped about her body beneath her arms, and her black hair fell straight and heavy about her shoulders.

It was that black hair that made me think again, frowning,

as though I was within reach of something important that kept slipping away from me. It was as though I could feel that hair, full of a musky scent, touching my own cheek, see the sculptured perfection of those features close to mine, the dark African eyes that were full of sympathy.

'It was you,' I stammered at last. 'It was to this house that Farrel brought me. You cleaned my back and gave me a wrap to wear. I drank something and you made me feel better.'

'That is right,' she said gravely, 'you were rather ill and you knew little of what had happened to you. I am Melindo. Were you seeking me?"

Studying her impassive face it seemed clear that she was of mixed blood, but without the very obvious blend of negro and white common to the mulatto or octoroon. I found myself thinking there was something almost Polynesian about her. She spoke with a trace of accent in her voice, unexpectedly that of someone more accustomed to speaking French. There was a note of query in it, but no curiosity.

Somehow she held me in her spell and I found myself stumbling over my words. 'I ... I want to thank you, but truthfully that is not what I came for. I ...'

She moved forward with the soft tread of a wild creature until she reached the verandah's wooden rail, where she stood for a moment, looking down at me.

Then Farrel came through the doorway and stood behind her. And smiled.

6

IT WAS MATTHEW who was the first down the mail schooner's gangplank and on to dry land, his eyes alight with eagerness for a sight of Nassau town, and I must confess that I followed him with an eagerness that almost equalled his own. With Lucy chattering at my side it was easy to forget the sobering presence of Isobel Lavenham and allow myself to be swept up in the exhilarating feeling of taking part in a family outing.

There had been precious little shade on the schooner, but not even Isobel had preferred the stuffy cabin to the deck with its magically fresh draught of air, and although I could feel my face tingling from the sun, I stepped ashore on New Providence Island careless as to whether my skin was brown as an Indian's or not.

I had formed no clear picture in my mind of Bay Street, and now, as we walked away from the moorings towards it I was surprised to find a place so substantial and well kept. Had I but known it, I was enjoying the last, lingering signs of the prosperity that had come to the Bahamian capital during the war between the American States, when the harbour had been filled with British and French shipping, its owners eager to run any blockade for the sake of Confederate gold. Now the quay at East Bay Street was almost empty, save for the raggle-taggle of small boats trading between the islands. There was one there that caught my eye and I hesitated as I passed it, but my mind was on the afternoon ahead and the

moment of half memory had gone as Lucy caught my arm in her eagerness to show me the delights in store for us.

'I declare I'm excited at the thought of showing you just everything!' Childlike, she looked up at me with wide eyes, urging me to join in her pleasure. But next moment she was turning away again, her mouth dropping as she added petulantly, 'Of course it isn't like Montogomery. There, we used to . . .'

I found myself taking her hand, saying gently, 'I know, Lucy, but I haven't been here before. I'm relying on you to guide me.'

'Why, of course!' Her spirits soared again, as I guessed they would, and she pointed past the blues and greens of the flowers spilling over pink walls to a patch of grass surrounded with palms and boasting a white-painted bandstand. 'That's Rawson Square, and there's Crown Wharf behind, where the ships come in. And the Sponge Exchange is just beyond . . .'

Lucy prattled on, and I was content enough to walk on slowly through the hot sun, while she showed me the sights with a kind of innocent wonder. Besides which, I was interested enough in my new surroundings to pay attention to what she had to tell me, taking in the old Vendue House slave market, the Ice House and Customs Buildings and staring up respectfully at the coral pink limestone bulk of the Government Offices and Council Chamber which loomed over the rest like some vast and indigestible wedding cake.

That all Lucy's information was superficial, I accepted, for I had learned in those first few days at Constantine Cay that there was little that could hold Lucy's interest for more than a minute or so.

Nassau was all bigger than I had expected, older and more established, with a curious Englishness that seemed oddly at variance with the burning intensity of the sun and the negro passers-by in straw hats and brightly coloured shirts. There must have been a time when the harbour would have been a forest of masts, but now I could see no more than half a dozen of any size, while the huge warehouses had an empty, desolate look.

Already Lucy was tiring of our brief tour, saying impa-

tiently, 'It is time we went to the shops, Trudy, if we are to complete all your purchases.' She tugged at Matthew's hand, leading him across the street to the one-time houses which stood in rows, each with its upper storied balcony below which an awning hid the shop that had been made of the lower rooms. 'Come on, Matthew, I'll show you my favourite shop.'

I followed them more slowly, for Lucy's words had reminded me of the reason we had come to Nassau. There was money in the small silk reticule Lucy had loaned me, but I had tried to push the thought of how I had come by it to the back of my mind.

I stood before a milliner's window, staring sightlessly at its contents, while in my thoughts my feet were standing in the sand before the bungalow at Constantine Cay and Farrel Constantine was smiling down at me over Melindo's naked shoulder.

'I heard you call,' he said. 'I suppose someone helpfully suggested you might find me here?'

He had moved to the front of the verandah and I saw that he was at his ease in an open-necked silk shirt with full sleeves, and that instead of his customary riding boots he wore native sisal sandals on his bare feet. He had glanced quickly at the girl by his side who moved back unhurriedly into the dark interior of the building.

I met his gaze levelly enough. 'Yes,' I said, 'it was Lucy. I'm sorry if I have . . . disturbed you.'

'My dear cousin, you have not disturbed me at all. But you must not think hardly of Lucy. She is a chicken-brained creature who has a keen ear for servants' chatter. I have no doubt she was but recounting what she had heard somewhere and had no wish to cause you embarrassment.'

'If there has been any embarrassment caused, then it has been by you,' I returned tartly. 'You did not tell me you brought me here that night—that your . . . your friend bathed my wounds and gave me some sort of draught to dull the pain . . .'

'And covered you up. You must not forget that, cousin.'

Now the colour was high in my cheeks, just as he intended it should be. My discomfiture was his amusement, as we both

recalled that ride through the night. I could not help thinking how he must have held me, forcing me to keep my position over the saddle. And if the overseer, Stockwell, had gloated over my nakedness, then how much had this man remembered?

Even as I unconsciously shrank away from his gaze, he seemed to tire of baiting me and changed the subject abruptly.

'Do I take it, cousin, that you sought me out for some particular reason?'

I had refrained from rehearsing my words, and perhaps for this reason they had come somewhat more easily than I expected. Nevertheless there was little enough pleasure in the bald statement that I made, putting into so many words the fact that I was penniless and was therefore forced to look to him for enough money to meet the immediate needs of Matthew and myself. It seemed that I must be beholden to him for everything.

To my surprise he had shown neither continuing amusement at my predicament nor irritation that the matter had been raised at all. Instead he had stared down at me for a long moment, while it seemed to me that the blood ran angrily into the livid scar that disfigured his face. Then he said curtly, 'My apologies. You should not have had to ask. I'll see the matter is remedied before you leave with the mail tomorrow.'

And he had, I thought, remembering the envelope beside my plate at breakfast the following morning. I should have felt humiliated or cheapened in some way, but somehow he had succeeded in taking the awkwardness upon himself. Now, because I was thinking back about the incident, I found myself ill at ease again.

'Oh, Trudy,' Lucy's voice penetrated my thoughts, 'isn't that just quite ravishing?'

'I'm sure it would suit you.' I could not have said whether she was looking at a costume or a hat, but guessed correctly enough that she would pay little attention to what I said.

We went into that shop, and then another, and I forced myself to listen to Lucy's excited chatter. After all, I told myself, it was for this that I had asked Farrel for the money in the first place. It was too late to feel squeamish about it now,

so I bought lenghts of silk and cotton, a wide-brimmed straw hat and shoes. In another shop I purchased clothes for Matthew and then, my own business done, I was forced out of politeness to follow Lucy and her mother as they stopped at every other shop in Bay Street. Like her daughter Isobel Lavenham came to life when faced with the prospect of new clothes and she spoke more to me that morning than she had done since I had come to Constantine Cay.

'Trudy . . . Trudy . . . is this not becoming?'

Looking at the bonnet Lucy was holding out for my inspection, I answered as best I could, inwardly sighing with relief when we left the shop, pausing for a moment on the sweltering street while Isobel hesitated as to where to go next.

'You're very pale, Trudy, do you feel well?'

Matthew's eyes were studying me, wide with concern, and as Lucy and Isobel turned towards me at his words I could see their faces mirror the child's concern.

'I . . . I think it's the heat.' I looked around me in the hope of finding somewhere to sit down. I had no means of knowing whether it was the heat or not that was draining the strength from my limbs, the colour from my face. But it was true I felt very strange.

'We're almost at Frederick Street,' Lucy said, 'we could go to the Royal Victoria for luncheon, then Trudy could sit down.'

'I'm sure I shall recover . . .' I know she meant well, but the thought of sitting around a table in some bustling and noisy hotel was more than I could bear. I gave a despairing look about me and saw a shopfront a matter of yards away proclaiming that books, maps and a good selection of overseas newspapers were obtainable inside. Suddenly the prospect of the peace of a bookshop seemed overwhelmingly attractive. 'Please,' I said, 'you have luncheon together. Matthew too. I'll join you in a little while.'

'Are you sure?' Isobel said doubtfully. 'You don't look as if you should be left alone.'

'I shall be very well, I assure you. That bookshop looks so cool. I'll browse there for a few minutes and I'm certain to feel better."

'Very well, if that is what you would prefer.' Isobel accepted my wishes with the look of someone who is anxious to be rid of an uncongenial subject as quickly as possible. 'We'll leave you to find your own way to the Royal Victoria.'

I watched my companions move on through the sticky furnace of the street and then slipped gratefully into the promised refuge of my choice, finding it as quiet and shadowed as I had hoped it might be.

I glanced over the nearest titles with greater concentration than the task warranted, in an effort to rid myself of the feeling of faintness that had come over me outside. I felt better out of the sun, yet a feeling of oppression remained, that sprang from a curious apprehension of something unknown and malign still to come. I had hoped that the feeling of forboding that had been with me since my stormy arrival at Constantine Cay would have lifted once I had left its shores, but here in Nassau it seemed to hang over me more overpoweringly than ever. Not for the first time I found myself wishing that there was someone at Gaytons in whom I could confide, but I felt with absolute certainty that I was on my own. If anyone could have told me truthfully whether I had any rational grounds for fear, I felt instinctively that it would be Mother Moti, but there was something in the old negress's manner that convinced me she would never tell. That she knew well enough the significance of the straw doll that I had at this moment concealed in my reticule was something of which I was sure, but there had been a blankness in her eyes when I had shown it to her that held out little prospect of a confidence.

I moved restlessly across the book-lined room and as I did so I chanced to knock over a slight volume displayed individually upon a table. As I picked it up my eyes fell upon a discreet notice advertising that I held in my hand the latest work from the pen of a local author.

I glanced at the title without any great interest, imagining it to be a collection of undistinguished verse. But in this I was mistaken. The book was apparently a record of thirty years spent among the Bahamian islands, the experiences of a Reverend Owen Williams.

I stood for a moment with the book in my hand, my mind back on the sponge boat with Farrel Constantine standing up and shouting, 'Go back, Williams, you fool!' And I knew why I had caught myself noting the half familiar boat tied up close to where we had landed on East Bay Street. It had been the one that nearly rammed us.

'May I help you, madam?' The shopkeeper had come out of his office, a small, dried-up man in a crumpled suit, his eyes peering through thick lensed spectacles.

I touched the book. 'I see this is by a local author. Is it true that Mr. Williams knows a great deal about the islands?'

'Oh, there is no doubt at all of that,' my informant told me. 'Mr. Williams's career has been unconventional in some ways, and I fear that he might be at variance with his church, but if you are seeking an encyclopaedic knowledge of these islands, then I think I can promise you that he is such a man.'

I thanked him and, feeling rather guilty that I could not afford to buy the book, I went into the noonday sun. Perspiration was running down my arms by the time I had retraced my steps to the quay, but I hardly noticed. In some way that I made no attempt to understand I felt myself under a compulsion to seek out the preacher's boat, and I felt no surprise when I saw it was still there, any more than I considered it good fortune that as I crossed its gangplank a white-bearded face at the head of the companionway indicated that the man I sought was at home.

'Mr. Williams?' It was a pointless remark, for I knew it was he. Without waiting for a reply I went on, 'My name is—'

'You are a Constantine, I understand. I am surprised that a member of that family should seek me out.'

The soft voice with the distant remains of a Welsh lilt was that of an educated man, wildly at variance with the ravings that were all I had previously heard. He was a man of more than average height, but painfully thin, and beneath the shock of white hair his face was so gaunt that the bones jutted out from it at all angles, while years beneath a tropical sun had burned and almost blackened the skin until it was like stained leather. Yet the eyes that studied me were very

blue, although their whites were bloodshot and the hand he put out to steady himself was clearly shaking. He looked not unlike the kind of fanatic Solomon Eagle would have been, running naked through plague-stricken London with a brazier of coals upon his head, and calling down doom upon a sinful world. But for all his frailty and the soiled, patched cotton clothes, there was a courtliness about New Providence's scapegrace preacher that prompted him to extend his hand to me and assist me to the deck.

'Would you wish to come below?'

I nodded without speaking and he led the way down to a cabin that was both roomier and indeed cleaner than I had expected.

'Please be seated.'

There was a half empty bottle on the table which from the heavy scent that hung about the cabin I judged to contain rum. The heat in the enclosed space was like an inferno, and my distress must have been noticeable, for my host enquired if I would care for a drink. With the rum bottle in mind I shook my head, but he must have read my thoughts, for without further comment he went back up the companionway to return a minute later with a heavy silver goblet, full of a pale green liquid. The metal was cold to my hand and, caring little what its contents might be, I drank it eagerly, savouring first its chill that seemed to burn my tongue, then the sharp flavour of fresh limes.

'To some, I fear, the condition and serving of drink is one of the few things to be taken seriously.' My host smiled faintly as I put the goblet down gratefully. 'Now perhaps you may feel more inclined to tell me to what I owe your visit.'

'I was on that sponge boat the other day,' I told him. It was not what I had intended to say, but once the words were out I was glad of it.

'I see.' Mr. Williams did not drop his eyes. 'I think I can say without contradiction that it was not an incident reflecting credit on either side. Your relative behaved in a way not unbefitting a ruffian off the Barbary coast, while I went about my calling under the influence of drink."

I said levelly, 'I was responsible for neither one nor the

other. It was for another reason that I wished to speak to you.'

He waited politely.

I realised suddenly the difficulty of putting into words the thing that troubled me. In the end I asked simply, 'Can you tell me what you know about Constantine Cay.'

Mr. Williams looked down at his hands and then up again. 'It is an island approximately forty miles square, and like all the Bahamas was probably at some time in the past one of the upper parts of a submerged range of mountains. The greater part of it consists not of coral, as is popularly supposed, but a deposit of calcium bicarbonate.' He broke off and there was a glint of humour in those blue eyes as he said dryly, 'But these are not, I imagine, the facts you had in mind.'

I smiled in spite of myself. 'No. Tell me about the people.'

'There are the one-time slaves who came over with the Constantines; third and fourth generation Africans, for the most part. The others are Bahamians. They were probably once slaves as well, should you care to go back a long way.' He looked at me curiously. 'Are these the answers you want?'

I stared past the preacher, out through the small, brass-rimmed porthole and over the waters of the harbour. Even across that shimmering stretch of deep turquoise I seemed to see something evil. The truth, I thought, was that I had little enough idea as to why I was asking, or what I really wanted to know. Only the nameless sense of dread that still haunted me.

I opened my reticule and laid on the cabin table the doll I had found hanging at the door of my room. Lying there, it looked less grotesque than I had remembered it—merely a crudely made little figure of twisted sisal, its primitive daubed face staring up at the lamp gimbles.

Mr. Williams made a sound not unlike a sigh. Then he said quietly, 'How did you come by that?'

'It was left outside my room only yesterday.'

'And you have no idea what it is?' I shook my head. 'I asked one of the negro servants, but she said it was some kind of joke.' Mother Moti's eyes came back to me, wide, red-rimmed and frightened. I added quietly, 'I didn't believe

her. I have read of the centuries-old practice of image making in England.'

'No, one has instincts about such things.' He reached out and picked up the little doll, and I noticed that he handled it as though it were something dead or unclean. 'It is possible that it was the same instinct that prompted you to bring it to me.'

In spite of the stifling heat of the cabin, I felt a tremor of cold. 'Then it wasn't a joke.'

'No.' The Reverend Williams's eyes went from the little figure to the bottle of rum and then back to me. 'You will not object if I . . .'

'No,' I said, 'do as you wish.'

He poured rum and swallowed it slowly, and I saw the knuckles of his hand whiten as he gripped the glass. He poured again before saying: 'That object on the table is called a joujou. It is an evil thing and part of an evil faith. Leave it here and I shall see that it is burned.' He put his glass down with a steadier hand. 'Obeah—voodoo—they are much the same, a foul, dark cult with its roots somewhere in Africa. It is strongest on Haiti, but you can find it in a score of places throughout the Indies.'

I remembered what Lucy had told me about the drift back of the field hands at Gaytons to their old beliefs, with the active approval of the Constantines. And even more clearly I pictured the man before me, brutally turned back from his self-imposed task of keeping Christianity alive before it vanished before just such a cult as had produced the obscene little joujou on the table before me.

'So it has a following on Constantine Cay?' I said slowly.

He sighed. 'It is always there. Even when some slave has been converted for three generations somewhere at the back of his mind is—this. And no one who has come into contact with it will ever doubt the power this foul creed has over its followers. It comes from somewhere unimaginably far back—something as old as Satan himself. To the Western mind, it may seem to be a strange mess of superstition and childish mumbo-jumbo. But to the African, with his childlike mind, that which he wishes to be real *is* real.'

'And this . . . this joujou.' I leaned forward urgently. 'What does it mean?'

'It means you should go away.'

Mr. Williams refilled his glass. His eyes, which up till now had been steady enough, began to burn with a fervour that I should have accepted as religious had I not been better informed. His voice thickening slightly, he went on, 'You should flee the accursed land, Miss, for the Lord is no longer with it. Abandon the ungodly while there is yet time.'

He was slipping away from me and he had still not answered my questions. 'Please,' I begged, 'what does this figure *mean*?'

'It means that the newcomers are accursed. That the power of obeah, as directed by the greatest of its priests, has already spelt out their doom. That the house shall fall and the goodness be sucked out of the earth, while a plague shall fall on whatever crops may remain. And that the head of the household shall die, leaving no son to till the ground.' The rum splashed into the empty glass. 'All this was ordered a long time ago.'

'But why should *I* be involved?' I cried. 'Why should this . . . this thing be pinned to my door. I am not even a true Constantine. I am called Gertrude Marchmont. There is not even the tie of marriage . . .'

But he stared at me, hardly taking in what I was saying. 'If you should know the meaning of the joujou I can only guess that you will meet the same fate. And now I have a matter of some urgency to attend to.'

'But . . .'

I saw him make a gesture towards the brass cased clock secured to the bulkhead at his side and knew that I would get no more information from the Reverend Williams this day.

At the same time that I rose with the dread even more strongly with me than before, I heard footsteps on the deck above, then rapidly descending the companionway. I must get away, I thought. *Get away*. I turned to brush past the newcomer and then stopped as my heart gave an upwards lift of sudden and unexpected pleasure.

The man who was standing there, smiling, and stooping in

the confines of the cabin, was none other than Raoul Fernac.

It was not, I think, until that very moment that I realised quite how much I had felt myself in need of a friend. More than that, I had thought of the *Minator's* captian ever since I left his ship in such fear of my future. I could not but remember that moment in what had once been my father's cabin when I found such comfort in his arms.

Now he was looking down at me with those piratical black eyes and I was powerless to prevent the sudden pounding of my heart. 'So,' he said softly, 'we meet again. It had to be, I think, Miss . . .'

Only then did I think beyond the sheer pleasure of seeing him. With something akin to panic, I remembered he knew me only as Judith Silverwood, that he was moreover on the point of using that name. 'I declare, Captain Fernac, that I've never been happier to see anyone.' It was with surprise that I realised the voice I was hearing was my own. Not even Lucy at her most forceful could have equalled the eagerness with which my greeting cut across his own. I rushed on, 'I was at this moment saying to Mr. Williams that I was quite overcome by the heat. Perhaps you could see me to the deck . . .'

'But I am honoured to be of service. Come.' And the hand held out clasped my own to guide me up the steep steps. I caught the swift glance that Raoul gave to my host, as though debating as to whether the older man had offended me or not. But the French-bred mind was quick enough to act out the part required without question. I murmured my farewells to Mr. Williams, but he, slumped in his chair, had already forgotten me. Only when we stood in the sunshine did Raoul release my hand and turn to me with one eyebrow raised quizzically.

'Those eyes of yours—how they have haunted me, Judith, and when, for that short time, I thought you drowned, I wondered how I might ever forgive myself. Now . . .' and I found his eyes resting on me with an expression that did nothing to calm the still wild beating of my heart . . . 'I can ask that *you* should forgive me. My crew received as severe a punishment as I could mete out.'

'There is nothing to forgive,' I replied in a low voice, 'and

our accident was not caused by the carelessness of your crew. If Malachi . . .' I stopped, for even as I spoke the name I suddenly became aware of the huge negro standing very still and watchful on the quay below. He gave me the smallest of deferential bows which I acknowledged before turning back to Raoul. 'If Malachi could have saved us he would. Until I heard that he had been making enquiries about Matthew and myself I truly thought he must be drowned.'

'No, as you see, he is sound in limb, but he was deeply concerned about the boy, taking the blame upon himself. Fortunately, he is a powerful swimmer, but one of the others was indeed lost. Now, Judith—to a more cheerful subject. How is the b . . .'

I stopped him with a touch on his arm, looking about me nervously. 'At this moment I must ask that you do not call me Judith . . .'

'Ah, a change of identity!' Raoul put his hand beneath my arm and led me on to the quay. 'You are, I should guess, at present masquerading as young Matthew's sister. Am I correct?'

Shocked at his shrewd guess, I nodded. 'But how could you know?'

'It seemed unlikely that you would have chosen to be anyone else as from what I hear some family relationship is more than usually desirable at Constantine Cay.' He looked at me closely. 'You are still there, I presume?'

'Yes. I came to do some shopping with Mrs. Lavenham and her daughter, Lucy. Matthew is here, too.'

Raoul did not query the names but merely nodded thoughtfully. Then he adjusted the set of his gold-braided cap on his well-groomed dark hair.

'Come, I shall buy you a glass of wine and you can tell me how it is you are so glad to see me. If you are in any kind of trouble, then I am here to help you. Now, shall it be the Royal Victoria, or somewhere else?'

We had stopped at the end of the quay and I looked back once at the boat and then at the brilliant sparkle of the sea. How could it possibly be that I had seen anything evil in it?

Even the little doll at this moment seemed more like a childish prank than the work of some dreadful cult.

I smiled at the man waiting for my reply, hoping that my joy at our meeting was not too transparent, but there was regret in my voice as I said, 'I should enjoy that, truly, but the others are waiting for me there for luncheon. They do not know that . . . that . . .'

'You visited the unfortunate Mr. Williams?' Raoul shrugged his shoulders in the way I remembered so clearly. 'Then there is no need for them to know. You shall tell me why, of course. But I have it in my mind to visit this Constantine Cay for myself. Perhaps I may be permitted to offer you the services of my own sloop.'

'Oh,' I said breathlessly, 'but what of the *Minator?*'

'She rides at anchor off Bimini.'

'I would like that very much, but,' and I knew disappointment coloured my voice, 'we landed this morning from the mail schooner, and I believe it has been chartered for our return.'

Raoul was walking back towards the town. He stopped so suddenly that we were almost touching. There was a wicked glint in his eye. 'The mail schooner,' he said thoughtfully, 'that is Captain Last, is it not?'

'Some such name, I believe.'

'He has experienced trouble with his tiller lines, I believe, and is having to reeve new ones. Your friends will be glad that you met me.'

'You know perfectly well . . .' I started to say that Captain Last had experienced no such thing, but then saw the challenge as bold as the lie in his eye, and said nothing more. I knew then that every effort I had made to hide my pleasure at this meeting had failed. But I did not really mind. I found his audacity exciting.

His white teeth gleamed briefly. 'I think,' he said, 'to soothe your troubled conscience, by the time I meet you—at shall we say five o'clock—I have a feeling that it may well be true. Now, I shall escort you to the Royal Victoria.'

'Thank you.' I hesitated. 'How shall I explain our meeting?'

'*Par hazard*. How else? You recognise the Captain of the

ship that brings you to these islands. It would be uncivil to ignore him.'

He made it sound so easy. I thought, and found myself wondering if there was any time when Raoul Fernac might indeed find himself at a loss. But whatever doubts I may have entertained vanished as I made the necessary introductions in the cool of the Royal Victoria's saloon, and listened to him repeating his offer.

'It is thoughtful of you, Captain,' Isobel told him, and I was amused to notice that she was speaking unusually graciously, 'but of course we could not possibly presume upon your kindness. If necessary we can stay until Captain Last has completed his repairs.'

'But Mama,' Lucy objected, 'you know we promised Grandfather that we should be back tonight.'

I turned towards her as she spoke and caught the expression in her eyes as she raised them towards Raoul. I would not have been surprised to see interest in them, fascination even, for in truth the man standing before her was vastly more presentable than any she would normally have enjoyed the chance of meeting. But for a moment Lucy's expression eluded me, and it was not until later I realised that there had been no anticipation in those green eyes. Instead, they held the look of someone who has sought for something for a long time, and had finally come to the end of the search.

I turned away from that look, feeling as though a tight knot was constricting my breathing. And, I am ashamed to say, at that moment I wished Lucy a long, long way from Constantine Cay.

Raoul responded to that look with his own particular smile.

How could he not? 'If a promise has been made, then a delay would be most unfortunate. I beg of you to reconsider my offer.'

Isobel's charm was in no way diminished. 'Put in such a way, Captain, I find it difficult to refuse . . .'

Raoul bowed slightly, then turned to me. 'At five, then?' His eyes were dark pools and I felt myself drowning in them.

'Yes,' I whispered. 'At five.'

7

ONE OF THE stranger things about Raoul was that I never for one moment doubted that he would indeed be awaiting us at the time arranged. For all his charm and lightness of manner I could not but remember that there was a hardness and a purpose underneath that came very much to the fore when he was about matters of business instead of charming ladies, yet during that crossing to Constantine Cay I saw a new side to his character—one that left me full of doubts about myself. Had he really said, only a few hours ago, that my eyes had haunted him?

If I'd been meeting him then for the first time it is possible that my feelings would have been very different, for there was something in his open flattery and over-attentiveness towards Isobel Lavenham that would have filled me with misgivings at its lack of restraint. As it was, I was aware that he was setting out to charm his way into her good books, because he wanted to be made welcome at Constantine Cay. It was difficult not to feel a certain admiration for the manner in which he went about his task.

It was his manner towards Lucy that disturbed me. I was little experienced in the overt flirtation between a man and a woman, yet I had seen enough to know it was part of a certain type of social life and could have as little significance as play acting. If Raoul had flirted with Lucy—because, after all, she was a very pretty girl—I think I would have known he was doing it to draw a reaction from me. But he did noth-

ing like this, only treated Lucy with grave courtesy, and yet I sensed his awareness of her as strongly as if he had reached out and touched her. As for Lucy, her eyes followed him wherever he went.

I told myself it was more important for Raoul to reach Constantine Cay, and then perhaps there would be the occasion to speak to him of some of my fears. Certainly by the time we heard the pounding surf that warned us of our approach to the island I had no doubts at all that between them, Lucy and her mother would ensure their new friend's welcome.

In spite of this I was surprised at the readiness with which even Reddish was captivated by Creole charm. The Colonel appeared seldom before dinner, but on this occasion, having taken a glass of wine with his visitor and thanked him for his services, it seemed to be understood that Raoul should stay overnight at Gaytons.

It was, in all conscience, a small enough courtesy, but I was learning something of the way things were ordered by the elder Constantine that it seemed an indulgence on almost a royal scale. And yet, as we sat round the dining table that evening I was aware of some kind of contact already established between the two men. Of course I could not forget that Raoul had been employed by the Colonel to bring his grandson safely from England. Equally, I could not also forget Raoul telling me that his orders were to land the boy on Constantine Cay and continue immediately on his voyage. In spite of this I could not help but notice that the Colonel listened with greater attention than to any member of his own family.

I watched Raoul from where I sat on the other side of the table, marvelling at the ease with which he made the conversation his own. Suddenly, as I listened, as closely as anyone else, something—I shall never know what it was, a word he spoke, an inflection in his voice perhaps—took me straight back to that evening I met him, under the magnolia tree in Miss Pilkington's garden. The sensation was so strong that I could almost feel the heavy perfume of the waxy blossoms all about me.

In that moment, as if he had entered my very thoughts, he seemed to hesitate in mid-sentence and looked across at me. As I met the gaze of those sombre dark eyes I felt the same tingle on my skin, only this time it was stronger, as if a flame had leaped up my arm. I looked quickly away, deeply embarrassed that he might have guessed at my thoughts, but the conversation continued, with hardly a pause. Nobody, I decided, could guess at the extraordinary intensity of that moment. But when I fould the courage to look up again it was to meet the studied, ironic gaze of Farrel Constantine. This time I was determined not to look away, so I lifted my chin as though to defy him into thinking something that did not exist.

During the meal Farrel had been saying little, toying with his food in a preoccupied way, absorbed, as ever, in his own thoughts. But I was sure he had heard every word that Raoul had said. I had expected Lucy and Isobel to hang on their new friend's every word, but I was surprised that Raoul could acclaim the same attention from Charles, and even Matthew, either of whom might have been expected to tire of the easy flow of small talk.

Raoul had been describing some incident concerning the corruption of a government official in Panama when Reddish Constantine changed suddenly from listener to questioner, cutting through the other's half-finished anecdote with the self-absorbed arrogance of the old.

'Let us talk of the present for a moment, Captain Fernac. What keeps you in these waters when you seem more used to the high seas?'

Raoul twisted his wine glass in long fingers. 'These waters ... you see I wanted to explore a little further into your own industry.'

'Our own industry?' Reddish Constantine raised his heavy eyebrows with a faint smile. 'I was not aware that we had one, sir. Save, perhaps that of thinking of happier times.'

Raoul laughed openly. 'On the contrary, Colonel, the Bahama islands have a business that is very much their own. I was referring to wrecking.'

'Wrecking!' I spoke before I knew I did so. All eyes turned

to me with some surprise. Reddish Constantine's face expressed amusement.

'It would seem, Captain, that at least one of your listeners does not approve.'

I remember my father telling me of the trade in Cornwall and the Scilly Isles in the days when he had first sailed before the mast of his own brother who had lost his life when the vessel on which he had been serving had sailed by a light that should have guided it to safety, but instead drew him and his companions on to the rocks in order that the waiting ghouls could have their fill of plunder without risk to themselves. Like piracy, it was a vanishing industry, but of the two crimes I had always looked on wrecking as the worse. Now, to hear Raoul light-heartedly claiming it as his own made me feel suddenly sick. Sick and confused as the statement seemed wholly unbelievable. Raoul was a man of the sea, and by their very nature wreckers belonged to the safety of the land.

I said, as lightly as I was able, 'I think, Colonel Constantine, that Captain Fernac was speaking in jest.'

'On the contrary,' he returned with equal lightness, 'I was speaking with great seriousness.'

'But wrecking is a crime,' I argued.

Raoul stopped smiling and glanced towards Farrel, as though looking for confirmation from a different quarter.

'And what can our sweet cousin know of wrecking?' Farrel leaned back in his chair, giving me one of his sardonic looks.

'I know from my father . . .' I started, provoked by the way he seemed to treat me as an addle-pated child.

'Your *father*?' It seemed then to me that the whole room was silent, as Farrel spoke the words that could so easily unmask me. 'I did not know he was a seafaring man.'

'I did not mean . . .' I started to stumble, but then I felt gentle pressure on my foot under the table and Raoul was answering, his voice smoothing away the stony path I had laid for myself:

'I believe I remember Miss Marchmont telling me that she used to enjoy the tales she heard from seafaring relatives. I found, when we travelled together, that she passed on some

of her pleasure in travel to her young brother. Is that not so, Trudy?'

I nodded, numbly, and thought with relief that the moment of danger had passed until I met Lucy's puzzled, even angry stare, as she looked from Raoul to me. Surely, I prayed, she was not quick-witted enough to guess. I turned back to Farrel, who was talking to me. I must not imagine pitfalls when none were there.

'It is true enough,' Farrel was agreeing, 'the islanders speak of wrecking when others would more properly speak of salvage.'

'Of course,' Raoul nodded quickly, addressing himself to me, 'the waters in these parts are of an incredible shallowness, and coral reefs are everywhere. Add to that the hurricanes which are a legend and it is easy to understand that this has long been a graveyard for sailors. Not of last year, or the year before, but from the days of Columbus himself. The old wrecks are under the sand now, but there are East Indiamen enough to repay anyone who takes the trouble to look for them. After a storm, God knows a fortunate man can gather enough in a week to last him and his family for the whole year.'

Farrel smiled wryly. 'Anyone would vouch for that who has tried to keep a fleet after sponges,' he said. 'A bad patch of weather and word of a ship or two floundering and one's hard put to find a man to make up a crew. Back in the days when they worked themselves it was taken for granted you wrecked when you weren't sponging, and they keep to the old ways still given half a chance.'

'What do they find?' I asked curiously, determined to continue playing my part.

'Little enough that's any use once it's been in the water,' Farrel told me. 'Sometimes tea off an Indiaman, but more often than not the boxes are stove in and the contents ruined. There's the odd stick of furniture and a ship's lamp or two. Nothing to make a man rich.'

'There's more than one galleon down there,' Reddish Constantine said unexpectedly.

Charles Lavenham grunted. 'If all the tales told of Spanish

treasure ships were true, Spain must have had a navy three times the size of anything the world has ever known.'

'True.' Rather to my surprise the white face of the old man showed no resentment at the interruption. He went on heavily. 'Nevertheless some of the wrecks must have existed at one time. This is the route the silver ships used when they carried tons of the stuff from South America back to Spain.'

Isobel gave a little laugh of disbelief. 'I declare, Father,' she exclaimed, 'that you're as ready to go romancing as the rest. South America would have had to have been made of gold and silver if all the tales are true.'

'Ma Foi!' Raoul gave a quick gesture with his well-cared for hands. 'I do not know if the land was made of precious metals, Madam, but it is very certain that parts of it could claim to be something very near it. I myself have seen what is left of the Monte d'Argento, the so-called Mountain of Silver, in Peru. Two hundred years ago the Spaniards riddled it with tunnels like maggots in a piece of cheese, so eager were they to get the ore out. And get it out they did. They are an orderly people in some ways, the Spanish. The records of what was paid into the state treasury still exist, and it is said to total five hundred million dollars. Me, I am inclined to believe that in this case the old tales are true, and that the wreck of a treasure ship would be well worth having.'

While he was speaking I happened to glance over to Lucy whose feelings were also so plainly mirrored in her face. She had certainly lost interest in me. I was surprised to see that though she was quite still, as though listening with the rest, her face was expressionless, the pinpoints of her eyes fixed on a spot somewhere beyond Raoul. It was not just a look of boredom but of something beyond that, as if her mind was closed to us all.

Then I heard Farrel's voice and I turned back to see his face twisting into a smile. From this side his scar was not visible. 'Well worth having indeed,' he returned, 'but I have yet to hear anyone name one, let alone say where she lies!'

'There was one called the *Santa Anna*,' Reddish Constantine said. He was looking directly at Raoul as he spoke, as if there was no one else in the room, and it was as though some

message had flashed between these two men. But then the Colonel was leaning back awkwardly in his chair, beckoning to the old house negro, Ham, who stood impassively beside him. There was a moment's pause while the servant moved to the buffet and picked up the silver salver on which were ranged the heavy decanters of port and spirits.

Isobel caught my eye and I rose with Lucy and herself, gesturing to Matthew to accompany me. Not for the first time I found myself resenting the custom that decreed that females should withdraw at a meal's end, however entertaining the conversation might be; and the prospect of spending the next three quarters of an hour listening to Isobel and Lucy dissect the guest and his effect on the family, filled me with dismay, so I made the excuse that it was time for Matthew to retire to bed.

'Will you come and say good night to me, Trudy?' Matthew asked the question hopefully, producing much the same words that I would have put into his mouth. Yet, when I followed him to his room, I must confess I paused awhile on the landing at the head of the broad staircase. At first I could not have said what compelled me to do such a thing, but then I realised I was listening for the secret sounds one can detect in every house. But the faint creaking of the woodwork, joined with the occasional louder crack of a beam shrinking after the heat of the day, was all that came to my ears. Tonight the drums were silent. Whatever it was that nurtured the feeling of unease that now seemed to be my constant companion belonged, I was willing to swear, to some other agency than the building itself.

I went into the small, corner room next to my own where Matthew slept, smiling at Mother Moti, as the old negress drew the coverlet and smoothed the sheets on his bed. I had noted that she had done that every night since the incident of the scorpion.

'You all right now, child?'

'Yes, thank you.' He looked very small as he climbed into the big tester, while the old woman padded silently out into the corridor, shutting the door behind her.

I sat on the edge of the bed and chatted as best I could to

this strange child who had come to mean so much more to me than I had any right to expect. I was used to his oddly detached air and the haunted look that had never quite left his eyes. Sometimes he would barely speak to me at all, but this evening his eyes were bright with the stimulation of the table talk. It was natural enough, I told myself, that a small boy's imagination should be fired by talk of pirates and treasure trove and I was not surprised when he said, 'I like Captain Fernac, Trudy. It's funny, but I don't think I did so much, when we came here from Charleston with him. I know you'll laugh at me, but I even think he used to frighten me a bit. Now, it's different. And he's seen so many thrilling things.'

'He has indeed,' I agreed. And then I added honestly enough, 'I like him too.'

He sighed. 'I hope when I'm grown up I can travel all over the world like he has.'

I smiled at his childish longing and stood up to go, when he said quickly, 'I've something to show you, Trudy.' He felt beneath his pillow with an excited, though slightly guilty air. Finding what he sought, he held out something that glowed dull yellow in the lamplight. 'Do you know what it is?'

I took the proffered object, and for a moment was at a loss even to make a guess as to what it might be. It was a fluted bar of metal, rounded and finished rather beautifully at one end, but terminating at its other extremity in no more than a narrow, inch-long slit. It was heavy, and I judged it to be made of brass, and rather old. I could not help noticing how comfortably it rested in my palm. It was that, I think, that struck a chord in my mind, and I doubled my fist around it, noticing how thumb and little finger sank naturally into little hollows that might have been made for them.

'Why,' I exclaimed, 'I think it is the hilt of a dagger of some kind.' I pointed to the slit. 'See, that is where there must once have been a blade. Where did you find it?'

The boy hesitated for a moment before answering. Then he said awkwardly, 'I think it belongs to Captain Fernac. When one of the men from the sloop was bringing his valise ashore he dropped it and . . . and . . .'

'And this fell out?'

'I *think* it did. I'm not sure. But I wondered what it was and I picked it up.'

I said with a smile, 'Well, in that case I think it would be best if you explained what happened and gave it back to Captain Fernac, don't you?'

Matthew took the old dagger hilt back reluctantly. 'I don't want him to think I stole it.' Then he looked at me hopefully, 'Could you give it back for me, Trudy, and explain?'

'No,' I said firmly, 'I could not. It is best if you give it back yourself. And I'm sure Captain Fernac will understand if you explain how you came by it.'

He replaced it under his pillow unwillingly. 'Very well, Trudy. Are . . . are you going anywhere tonight?'

'Going anywhere?' I shook my head, thinking as I did so that I would be hard put to find anywhere to go. 'No, Matthew, I am not. But why do you ask?'

I thought I detected relief in his eyes, but all he said was that he was just asking, and that he liked to know that I was near. It was a simple enough statement, but one that touched me deeply. Perhaps because Matthew was not a demonstrative child, and dear though he had become to me, he seemed to guard his own feelings jealously.

'When shall you be coming to bed?'

I smiled. 'In a little while. Perhaps an hour or so. But by then you will be fast asleep.'

His expression changed again, and I tried in vain to discern what emotion had stirred him. But he said slowly, 'I . . . I do not think I shall be asleep.' Then, looking at me appealingly, he added, 'Shall you come in and see me before you go to bed?'

'Yes, if you wish.' I stood up and went over to the window. The moon, enormous and full, lit the line of trees surrounding the house as though it were daylight, although beneath the broad-leafed branches the shadows were purple black. I could just hear the curious pattering of the palm fronds as the steady breath of the trade winds stirred them and as on an earlier occasion the sound of a cock crowing echoed eerily and unnaturally from somewhere to the west. Perhaps I

should have heard the warning then in the sound of that cock's crowing, that something sinister stirred out there in the darkness, but I was so busy trying to repress my own overwrought imagination that I did nothing.

I asked casually, 'Are you not sleeping well?'

'It's so hot.' He hesitated for a moment, then admitted, 'And sometimes I have dreams.'

'What sort of dreams?'

Again the hesitation. 'I can't remember. But I know I don't like them.'

I turned back to him, saying as briskly as I could, 'That is something that comes from too much supper. Perhaps it would be best if in the future you had something light brought to you in bed.'

Matthew said indignantly, 'But I am old enough to stay up and have supper with everyone else. Uncle Farrel told me so himself.'

'Did he?' I was surprised and I think in some measure touched that Farrel should have shown sufficient interest in his nephew to reassure him upon such a point. 'Well then, I suppose you must be. But you should take care what you eat in future.' I bent and kissed him lightly on the cheek. 'You will remember?'

'Yes, Trudy.' He smiled back at me with sudden warmth and his arms tightened suddenly and unfamiliarly about my neck.

'Good night.'

I bade him good night and turned the lamp out, and by the moonlight that flooded across the room, found my way to the door. It was natural enough that a ten-year-old boy should have bad dreams after eating chicken gumbo, I told myself, for in truth I could think of no other reason for *his* ill-ease.

By the time I had returned to the panelled drawing room it seemed that the gentlemen had joined the ladies, for Raoul was singing what sounded like a love song in a very passable voice, and accompanying himself on Lucy's guitar.

He looked up as I entered and his white teeth showed for an instant in a quick smile before picking up the thread of the song again, the thick, unintelligible Creole French sound-

ing curiously out of place in the very American surroundings.

Raoul had not come unprepared for his night's stay, for he had changed into black breeches of some light material and a shirt of white silk, caught at the neck with a stock so narrow that he had been able to tie it as a bow that hung down both elegantly but informally. His appearance struck me as being more that of some Parisian artist than the master of a ship. His dark eyes seemed to smoulder in the flickering light of the old-fashioned candles with which the room was illuminated, and even in his ease there was much in his tall figure that reminded me of a great panther.

His voice faded away, the song ending almost in the middle of a note. He put the guitar aside and smiled at Lucy. 'So that is all I remember. But it is a very sad song.'

'I didn't understand a word of it,' Lucy pouted. 'But I thought it was beautiful just the same.' I saw her look at Raoul with flushed face and parted lips. She had dressed tonight in what I guessed must have been one of her best dresses brought from her old home, a full skirted white silk gown, embroidered with the palest of pink roses. The ruffles round the hem and low-cut neck were also white, showing off the warm glow of her skin to perfection, and added to her look of almost pure innocence. I wondered how much of Raoul's appreciation of her young beauty was real and how much simulated. It seemed to me I intercepted his quick glance towards her. He had, I thought, been open enough to me regarding his intentions and I could deduce from his amused glance in my direction that he was in effect saying, 'See how easy it is for me to use this girl in order to make myself welcome here.' But there was no denying Lucy's attractions. Had she been anywhere else but Constantine Cay she would have had a string of beaux at her command.

With an attempt at conversation that was characteristic enough, Charles Lavenham cleared his throat and said, 'I found the language hard to understand. It would be Creole, I presume?'

'Creole . . . Gumbo . . . call it what you will,' Raoul agreed, 'It is made up of old French, some Spanish here and there

and a lot of African words. In it, there are many songs, though I confess I myself do not understand all of them.'

'But it is your own tongue, is it not?'

I saw a tightening of Raoul's face, and, although the question was one I might well have made myself, guessed instinctively that it was one that had given offence. Unexpectedly, it was Farrel who saved the moment from embarrassment.

'Captain Fernac's language is French,' he explained, 'as his forebears were natives of that country. The term "Creole" refers to pure blooded French families of long residence in Louisiana. Spanish families in the West Indies are Creoles also, for that matter. But the language is that of the slaves of the old colonial areas, who mixed their master's language with their own tongues.'

Charles flushed a dull red. 'Of course ... of course,' he said roughly, 'I was perfectly aware of that. I had merely forgotten.' He did not like being put in his place by Farrel, that much was obvious.

Raoul, however, bowed towards the younger man. 'Thank you, sir. A very clear statement of the situation.' He did not look at Charles. I felt a little chill at the hint of the savagery of pride that lay such a little way beneath the surface of the man. I had read of how the New Orleans gallant was ready to defend his honour at pistol point on the slightest of pretexts, but I had never had it proved to me before. I had always suspected that Raoul was not a man to be treated lightly.

'Lucy, why do you not play for us?' Isobel, suddenly aware of the uneasy silence, stirred herself to act the hostess, and the tension relaxed a little as her daughter seated herself at the pianoforte. She played surprisingly well, but the heat of the room was overpowering and I was glad enough when I saw that the hands of the gilt clock above the great fireplace stood at eleven o'clock and I felt able to make my excuses and retire. Seemingly I was not alone in wanting to bring the evening to an end, for judging by the general stirring in the room behind me as I left, the rest of the household was going to bed as well.

'Mis' Trudy! Mis' Trudy, is that you?'

I stopped at the top of the stairs, arrested by the urgency

of the voice that hailed me from the shadows of the corridor beyond. Then I recognised Sharon, the coloured girl who had helped dress me on my first morning at Constantine Cay. She was coming towards me from the direction of my own room, her face wide-eyed with distress.

'Why yes, Sharon, I'm here,' I said. 'What is it?'

The girl gulped, wringing her hands together in an agony of distress.

'It's Master Matthew, Mis' Trudy. He ain't there!'

Something inside me lurched with sudden fear, and I heard my voice saying harshly, 'Have you looked for him?'

'Yes'm.' Her huge eyes rolled in apprehension. 'I look everywhere. What's more he ain't put no robe on, nor no shoes. How come Master Matthew go out like that?'

With a sudden feeling of dread I pushed past the girl and ran to Matthew's room. As Sharon had said, it was quite empty, with the coverlet of the bed drawn back as though its occupant had pushed it aside and got up in the normal manner. But the boy's cotton night robe was still folded over the back of the chair, and his slippers were in their usual place beneath the bed. I hurried to the window, but a quick glance outside confirmed that below was a drop of some thirty feet. Wherever Matthew might be, it was clear he had left by the door.

Sick with fear I ran back into the corridor and down the stairs, to fall almost into the arms of Farrel and Charles, who were standing on the small mid-landing, finishing their cheroots. I managed to blurt out my news thinking as I did so that in an emergency I made little better job of it than poor little Sharon.

'Gone? Where the devil could the boy have gone?' I supposed it was typical of Charles that he should bluster when there were other things to be done, and indeed it was Farrel who laid a hand on my arm and gave me a slight shake.

'Keep hold of yourself, cousin, you won't help the boy by losing your head. You're quite sure he is not in the house?'

The briskness of his tone was reassuring. I drew a deep breath, willing myself to stop trembling. 'I have not looked myself,' I confessed, 'but Sharon says that she has.'

'God knows one can't rely on a fool of a girl, though it's not that large a place.' Farrel looked at Charles. 'You had best call Fernac; and get Ham and any of the hands who look as though they have sense enough to help. Trudy and I will check the house.'

I think I knew before we started that it was a search that would meet with little success. Nevertheless we looked every where it was even remotely possible that he might be before we turned to the outside. I stood for a moment in the airless silence, staring at the shadowed trees with a sick feeling of helplessness. And Matthew could, I knew, be virtually anywhere. No one had yet mentioned that he might not have walked out on his own. I thought of the accident of the scorpion, the accident aboard the sponge ship. Was this to be third time lucky—or unlucky? I even remembered the evil little doll—the joujou. Was Matthew the one who was accursed, the one *someone* was trying to send away? I have heard it said that children are more intuitive than adults, that their minds, clear of all sophisticated reasoning, can sometimes take an unconscious leap into the future. I thought of the haunted look in his eyes, his talk tonight about bad dreams. Did something tell him that he was not wholly welcome on Constantine Cay?

I jumped as Farrel came up beside me. 'We'd best get the hands together and spread them out like beaters. The chances are he had not been gone for long when the girl went into his room. He can't have walked far.'

I heard the firmness in his voice and wondered how far we would get without his authority. Nevertheless, I clasped my hands together to stop them shaking, to try to shut out my thoughts. 'He could have gone a few minutes after I left him,' I whispered. 'That was two hours ago.'

A huge figure came up out of the shadows and Malachi pushed his way through the chattering group of wide-eyed hands who had been gathering aimlessly. For some reason his unexpected presence startled me. How strange it was that he should appear just when Matthew was missing. He ignored Farrel, but came directly to me.

'Mis', they say the boy went 'long that ways.' He made a

gesture towards the trees at his back with a big hand. 'You want I should go 'long an' look?'

I could have asked who 'they' might have been, but at that moment I cared little enough. It was sufficient that someone had given me at least some kind of direction at a time when I most needed it. Then, as my mind took in the significance of what I had been told, I felt a wave of sick fear flood over me again.

'The sea.' It was difficult to get the word out. 'Malachi—the sea . . .'

I do not know what it was about the fact that filled me with such instinctive terror. Perhaps it was that something of the air of the place had communicated itself to me, so that my senses were more alive than they would normally have been. Whatever the reason I knew that I had to find Matthew at once, and that the sea stood for some terrible danger. Wildly, unthinkingly, I began to run through the moonlight in the direction Malachi had pointed, while the men followed me.

At most it could not have been more than half a mile from Gaytons to the rim of palms that flanked the beach, but running as best I could through the shifting surface beneath my feet, it seemed an intolerable distance. It also seemed that I was the only one running so desperately. I think I cried out the boy's name, but there was no reply until, panting with exhaustion, I broke out into the open and saw the great, silver arc of the shore before me.

'My God.' I heard the quiet exclamation from Farrel behind me, and then he was past me, moving swiftly towards the small stiff figure whose feet were already in the shallow water and moving on with unfaltering purpose.

'Matthew,' I cried out to him with something like desperation, but he did not so much as turn his head.

When I caught up with them Farrel was on his knees in the sandy shallows one hand on Matthew's shoulder. The child's eyes were open, but they stared into a distance they did not see.

'It's all right,' Farrel said, 'the boy is simply walking in his sleep.'

There was something so unnatural about the composure of the small figure standing there in the rippling water without any knowledge of its surroundings that for a moment I could only stare with a kind of bewilderment. I think it was Farrel who first guessed the reason for my silence, for he put his hand on my arm with unexpected gentleness.

'Have you never seen such a thing before?'

I shook my head dumbly. 'But to walk out here, into the open sea. He could have . . .'

'No,' said Farrel firmly, 'the shock of the deeper water would have woken him up before he came to real harm. Nevertheless it would not have been wise for him to wake in such a way.'

It did not occur to me to question him further. Instead I watched as he turned the boy round and led him back the way he had come.

'It is something,' he explained, 'that happens with some children more than others. He has not done this before?'

I shook my head. 'Not to my knowledge.' That was indeed the literal truth, and I wondered if in fact such nightly excursions might be expected again. Uncertainly I asked, 'Will he . . . remember this?'

'I think not. A physician once told me it was unwise to wake a sleepwalker, but apart from that I know as little as you. By all accounts you should be able to lead him back to bed without further trouble.'

I took Matthew's hand, which was as cold as ice, but he walked with me readily enough. By the time we reached the top of the beach a small crowd of servants and field hands had gathered, who drew back silently at our approach. Had I been less relieved it is possible I should have noticed then the lack of any kind of pleasure or satisfaction on their part. Rather, the expression on their dark faces was one of fear more than anything else, as they huddled together, their eyes never leaving our small party. But at that moment I was concerned only for Matthew and it was with a total sense of relief that I coaxed him along the moonlight track and back to the waiting house.

8

ONE FEARS, I suppose, those things which one knows least. Certainly I was afraid for Matthew, and none of Farrel's reassurances could ease that fear. Nevertheless, I soon learned that they were reasonable enough, for although I spent the rest of the night in a chair by Matthew's bed, it was obvious even to me that he was sleeping normally. Better still, when he woke in the morning he remembered nothing of what had happened during the night.

Farrel had passed the incident off lightly enough, and for him it was probably forgotten. At least, I could hardly hold him responsible for this. But for me it was not over. I would have given much to know whether Matthew's actions had been unusual or not, but it was not a thing that he himself might be expected to know as much as I, his supposed sister. Besides, it seemed far from normal to me that a child should be found more than half a mile from his home, walking steadily towards possible death.

It was best, I decided finally, that I should occupy myself with something other than Matthew's welfare. Surprisingly, this did not prove so difficult.

Ever since I had arrived at Gaytons I had wondered at the haphazard service and luke-warm meals that the rest of the household seemed to accept as something that could not be altered. Once, and then only by mistake, I had seen into the long, rambling kitchens, where the coal-black, middle-aged woman called Alice cooked with the aid of half a dozen

young girls and had been slightly taken aback that such primitive conditions should exist within such a house. I said nothing at the time, reasoning that for better or worse the domestic arrangements were Isobel's responsibility. But after one particularly distasteful meal I think she sensed my thoughts, for when we had left the men to themselves she gave an embarrassed laugh.

'I should do something about Alice. She seems to be getting worse every day.'

I said something to the effect that it could not be easy to find cooks at Constantine Cay.

'Oh, she can cook,' Isobel confessed, 'but all the hands are born lazy and I find myself at a loss whenever I have to speak to her. I went into the kitchens only last week and the heat and everything was so distressing that I had a sick headache for the rest of the day.'

'If you would like me to look at things for you, I should be most happy,' I told her.

'You truly would not mind?' I could not help being amused at the feigned surprise and pleasure on Isobel's heavy face. For the first time she regarded me with something approaching approval, and indeed went so far as to lay an ugly, over-ringed hand upon my arm. 'My dear, I just know it's not your concern, but I suffer so abominably . . .'

'Of course I should not mind,' I told her, 'if the woman can cook, it can surely need only a little encouragement to make her watch her work a little more closely.'

It had been an easy enough thing to say at the time, but when I made my way into Alice's domain I was conscious of a feeling of despair.

It was typical of the Constantines that they had transported from one land to another and reconstructed the huge range that must at one time have had little difficulty in accommodating six feet long logs regardless of the fact that, apart from the precious palms, there were few enough trees of any kind on Constantine Cay.

From Alice I learned that the row of hooks beneath the mantelpiece were for suspending wild turkey as they were basted before the flames, and the four feet high section of a

massive tree let into the kitchen floor turned out to be the place sacred to the making of Southern beaten biscuit.

Bullied a little, encouraged much, Alice blossomed, and I in turn gathered much from her.

Within a few days I had explored the hollow square of outbuildings beyond the kitchen door, finding a childish delight in the discovery that there was a flour house and a coffee house, quite apart from a much larger store for provisions of a general nature.

'Time was when we all had the hams of five hundred hogs a-smoking here,' Alice told me a trifle sourly as she opened the door of the smoke house to reveal a poor dozen, lost in one corner of the smoke-darkened ceiling. 'Ain't got no hogs to speak of now. Come to that, we ain't got too much of anything.'

As the improvement began to show I wondered how Isobel would react, for I had taken away her job and made it my own. But I had no cause for alarm. Lucy's mother was more than ready to forgo the appreciation of her family so long as it ensured that she would have more time to spend reading novels in the big rocking chair on the verandah, or spending increasingly long hours in bed.

'You are an accomplished housekeeper, child,' old Reddish observed after one particularly successful meal. 'Look to the accounts when you have time. And let me know should there be anything you require when next we send the sloop to Nassau.'

I thanked him a little clumsily and for some reason looked towards Farrel, perhaps half-expecting him to add his own praise, but I caught instead in his grey eyes an expression of sardonic amusement as if he suspected there might be a motive for my domestic involvement. I looked away quickly, lest he should misconstrue my flash of anger as disappointment that he had not joined in with the others, and been impressed by my success.

It may well have been because of my extra duties on top of my studies with Matthew that I saw less of the Constantines than before. Farrel and Charles were away at their business and Isobel kept well out of my way.

After that first night Raoul had not left for Nassau, and he had been here ever since. He had offered no explanation, neither had Reddish. But Isobel treated him like the prodigal son. And Lucy . . . I think sometimes Lucy saw him as a reincarnation of that young man from the plantation she had talked about in such nostalgic terms, the one who had died in the war.

It seemed to me that whenever I saw Lucy she was with Raoul. They rode together most days, early in the morning. I would hear their horses drumming across the pink sand, and I would pause as I allotted Alice her day's duties. Although they were half a mile away the air was so still that I could believe the distance to be only a few yards. When they returned I would sometimes hear Lucy laughing and occasionally I would peep out of the window and watch them. I know it was foolish that I should feel something akin to jealousy when I had no rights at all, but nevertheless the pain beneath my heart was very real. I did not find it easy to be natural with Lucy. When we met at luncheon or dinner there was a glow about her that had not been there before and I could not doubt the look of triumph in her eyes whenever they met mine.

I told myself that I did not mind, that Lucy's interest was Raoul Fernac's permit of entry into the closed society of Constantine Cay, and that he had never made any secret to me as to how he intended to attain it. Yet, as the days passed, my disillusionment deepened. Although he was unfailingly charming to me, his smoky-black eyes told me little of his feelings. Sometimes I could not help remembering the way he had touched me, that he was the first man to arouse in me the stirring of an emotion that I had not known I possessed. The loss seemed all the greater.

In fairness, however, I had to admit that the old man in that gloomy library claimed Raoul's attention as much or more than did his granddaughter. It was as though some affinity had grown between the two totally dissimilar men and often I would see them together at the window, staring at the distant green-blue of the sea, or deep in conversation. I wondered what Farrel thought of this curious friendship. It would

seem that he was indifferent yet something told me he did not like it.

It was on a morning on which I had been visiting the sadly neglected vegetable garden beyond the store, seeking some herbs that had become almost choked in the undergrowth that I chanced to find myself face to face with Raoul on his own. He had been riding as usual, and was dressed in his customary white silk shirt, but matched on this occasion with pale, doeskin breeches and black riding boots of a quality which I hazarded a guess were not obtainable anywhere within a thousand miles of where we stood. There was a coating of fine sand on his face and his hair, and he shook his head from time to time in order to rid himself of it with a gesture that was not unlike that of a spirited horse.

He leaned against the wall of the smoke house and smiled at me with unconcealed amusement as he took the basket I was carrying. Although I had been wanting so much to see him, I regretted this particular moment, conscious of the soil on my hands and the reprehensible condition of my hair.

'So,' he said, 'Matthew's sister has taken to the simple life.'

I flushed, imagining he saw me as some kind of servant of the Constantines. After all, he knew well enough I was not Matthew's sister. But I ignored his mockery and replied with a lightness that I hoped looked more natural than in truth it was.

'Someone has to look after the ordering of this house.'

'You could have left it to *la belle* Isobel. She it was who conducted matters before you arrived.'

'Yes,' I agreed, adding uncharitably, 'but not, I think with any degree of success.'

Raoul laughed out loud. 'True. The cooking has improved beyond measure.'

'And is that why you stay?'

His dark eyes studied me thoughtfully. 'I was under the impression in Nassau that you welcomed my company. But should you prefer me to go . . .'

'No!' I did not mean to sound so vehement, so in a calmer voice I went on, 'Of course I do not want you to go. You are the only person here I can really talk to. But you must admit

I seldom have the opportunity. You . . . you are so often otherwise occupied.'

'Had I not made myself agreeable to Madamoiselle Lucy, it is most doubtful that she would have pressed me to stay. It would seem discourteous to abandon her now. Discourteous and perhaps unwise. Do you not agree?' There was sudden warmth in his smile.

'I don't wish you to be discourteous to her,' I said in a low voice. 'I simply would prefer it if you did not feel it necessary to ignore me.' I found myself suddenly on guard against his blatant hypocrisy. He had no need to pretend. I knew he must be drawn to Lucy's beauty like a moth to a flame.

Having spoken so impulsively, I wondered if he could misconstrue my meaning. Lucy was, after all, more than three years younger than myself and a kingfisher to my sparrow. How I wished my own sheltered upbringing had brought me more social contact with gentlemen such as Raoul Fernac, so that I might understand the gentle art of flirtation rather than my father's way of outspokenness.

'I beg you to forgive me.' To my surprise Raoul's mood shifted suddenly, and he was no longer smiling. With sudden intensity he went on, 'The girl is nothing. But with that old man there may well be something. It is possible that we have need of each other, he and I.'

I stared at him, trying to readjust to this change of mood. 'You and the Colonel?'

'But yes.' He hesitated a moment, as if making up his mind whether to take me into his confidence. Then he said slowly, 'You remember when we were speaking of wrecks the other evening and Colonel Constantine told us of the *Santa Anna*?'

'Yes.'

'It seems that he knows where she lies. Only a little way off this island.' He turned and pointed to the south. 'There is a point called The Neck, is there not?'

I nodded, staring now in the direction of his arm. The point jutted out, rocky and bare of palms, some two miles from where we stood. 'Yes, that is it over there.'

'Off that, then. About half a mile. The water is so clear

that when the currents are right he says, the sand is washed aside and the timbers can be seen.'

I was half believing, yet aware of my doubts, which I voiced. 'But the *Santa Anna* was a treasure ship, wasn't she?' I pointed out. 'I should have thought that anyone who knew of her whereabouts would have kept the knowledge to himself.'

'Of course,' my companion agreed.

'Then why . . .'

'Because, my Trudy,' Raoul said quietly, 'the Colonel cannot move from his room unless his men carry him. He has neither the strength nor the knowledge of how to find if the *Santa Anna's* gold is there or not. But me—I have the strength, also I have a ship and know well enough how to go about these matters. I know equally well how to keep my mouth shut.' He smiled briefly. 'It is my business, is it not? Perhaps not a gentleman's business, but my trade just the same.'

I saw quite suddenly that indeed Raoul and Reddish Constantine had something in common. I wondered how the old man had come by this piece of knowledge, and having got it, how long he had waited for just such a person as Raoul Fernac to come along. And yet . . .

'I don't understand why he had to wait for you,' I said in my blunt way. 'There are other wreckers he could have sent for. And then there is always, Farrel, his son.'

'The son who, for some reason of his own, he has disinherited? It seems to me that he must have some grounds for such lack of faith in his family. And then, you will remember, Captain Farrel employs most of the experienced wreckers to man his sponge boats and it would be difficult to obtain their services without having to explain their change of employment to their master. It is in my mind also that the Colonel finds himself in need of money. You have only to look around this plantation. He is a proud man. He cannot like being dependent on the son he despises.'

Perhaps he was right, but I still wished I knew just why father and son quarrelled so bitterly. Certainly it was the kind of information that might well have fallen unexpectedly into

Reddish's possession, I thought. It would need only some fisherman to sight the wreck one day and pass on the news as of no account. Everyone on Constantine Cay might well have heard it, only to dismiss it as news of just one more lost wreck. Only the old Colonel, with his vast knowledge of the fate of the Spanish treasure ships, would have been in a position to study his charts and realise that this was not just one more wreck after all . . .

'Do you think you will be able to find her?' I said slowly.

'I have found her already.' Raoul gave me a small boy's grin of triumph. 'Yesterday I took the sloop out on my own, and she is there all right. At first I asked myself why this should be, and why no one has found her before. But the water is deeper than usual where she lies, and away from the sponge beds. It would be strange if one should find her by chance.'

'Raoul,' I said suddenly, 'who else knows about this?'

'No one. He trusts few, that old one. Least of all his family.'

I studied the careless dark eyes that looked down at me and felt that same hypnotic quality that had drawn me right from the moment he had found me under the magnolia tree. Why should I doubt him? By nature he was a gambler, an adventurer, even I recognised that, just as I recognised that he was also a business man who was entering into a straightforward business deal. But once again I could not hold back my questions.

'I still do not understand,' I said, 'why he should trust you.'

'Because I am not family. And though I do this thing for money, not *all* the money.'

'But he's helpless, a cripple. What could he do if you did take everything and just sail away?'

Raoul laughed again, but so softly that he made no sound. 'He could do nothing, of course. But the reason he is not worried by that eventuality is one that you will, I think, find hard to understand. It is something of the South that will soon die now. But while it lasts it is something not without merit. That old man has lost money, land, slaves—everything. He lives in a world of fantasy, dreaming of times that will never come again. Me, I'm a wrecker. When not that, the master of

a ship that plies for hire. Nevertheless, we *are* gentlemen. Between us there is no need for more than the spoken word. Does that seem foolish?'

'No, not foolish,' I shook my head. I could have said that what was foolish was the fact that Raoul or Reddish Constantine would readily try to kill each other should they quarrel over a game of cards for the same, strangely old-fashioned code of honour. Then I added, 'But even if you have explained why the Colonel trusts you, I still do not understand why you are prepared to tell me.'

For a moment Raoul did not answer. Then he said in a strange, sober voice, 'One does not of necessity trust the women one loves. I have often found quite the reverse. But for each man there is usually one special woman to whom it is wise to give one's heart and one's trust as well. One seeks her for a long time, and many die without finding her at all.' He was no longer leaning against the wall, but standing rather formally upright. 'I laugh much, Trudy, but I'm not laughing now when I say that in you I think I have found such a one.'

I have heard it said that a woman in love can never hide her feelings. I do not know whether I was in love or not, but I do know how my heart turned over, that joy flared through my whole body as if it were on fire.

'I'm not laughing either,' I said. He held my gaze as if he were hypnotising me, so that finally I had to turn away in confusion. It was in truth the first declaration of affection that anyone had made to me. Oh, how I wished, my apprenticeship in the art of love had been learned at an earlier age, so that I should know whether his feelings towards me were as tender as his words. Then, his lean brown hands were clasping my shoulders and turning me to face him. He bent to kiss me on the lips. His touch was as light as the wing of a bird, but still my lips were burning.

'Raoul ... Alice will be returning in a minute.' I pulled myself free, finding it all at once difficult to catch my breath. I think that he realised the absurdity of the situation, for he made no move to restrain me, and in a moment that familiar, mocking smile was in his eyes again.

'To be compromised in the kitchen garden—truly a fate

lacking in distinction! But we may speak of this at another time.'

Still breathless, I said, 'Very well, Raoul.'

To my surprise he did not move away, but stayed close to me, very still, his dark eyes seeming to caress me. Then he said:

'There is, of course, a more practical reason for my confiding in you over the other matter.'

'There is?' It was so hard to tell when this man was jesting or not.

'It is possible that from time to time I shall have certain communications with a friend in Nassau. I believe you will be travelling there more frequently with your new duties. I have sent word for *The Minator* and my second officer will sail her to me well enough. Also I can buy the silence of my crew, who are well used to work requiring—discretion. But this of which I speak is another matter. No master sails with hands who will not get drunk, and in such condition men talk too much. You understand?'

'I understand well enough,' I assured him. 'And I shall do what I may to help.' Then I added, 'But how is it possible to keep your search a secret? Everyone will see *The Minator*. Do you imagine that no one will question what you are doing out there off The Neck, day after day?'

'You, little Trudy, are as sharp as I expected you to be.' His hand ran down my bare arm and I shivered. 'I shall let it be known that I am about my usual work. That some blockade runner went down there during the war with a cargo of—what shall we say—whisky aboard. At any rate something that the sea is not likely to have harmed too much, and which I can come by easily enough so that I may have something to show for my pains.'

We laughed together then, like conspirators. But later, when I was alone, I was still laughing but now at the sheer joy of being loved. Nor had I come to earth the following morning when Alice confessed shamefacedly that she had forgotten to make the necessary arrangements to supply the soft-shelled Blue Crab that had been already planned for today's luncheon. I knew that Reddish Constantine was greatly

attracted to the strange delicacy and had gone so far as to promise that he should have it today. My pride would not let me confess failure to obtain the creatures.

Today I was not to be put out even by the forgetfulness of a cook, so instead of giving her the sharp edge of my tongue I asked her instead where the crabs could be found.

'They comes from Solomon, ma'am.' I think Alice herself was surprised that I had taken the matter so lightly, for her eyes were wary as she answered me. 'He's the ol' man what lives by himself way 'cross the other side of the Torrent. You want I send someone there right 'way? There's a fair wind, an' it won't take more than an hour, there an' back.'

The Torrent, I knew, was the local name for the narrow fast-flowing strip of sea that divided the top part of Constantine Cay from the main body of the island, and it was easier to take a boat all the way from Gaytons' own beach than attempt the first part of the journey by road. All at once the prospect of an hour at sea in a small boat seemed immensely to be desired. It was, I suspected, the prospect of an hour of personal freedom that attracted me more than anything else, for I had been thinking more and more how strangely confining life on an island could prove. So, much to Alice's wonderment, I took from her the big covered basket in which the fish was usually carried, and with a lanky youngster named Henry at my side as guide and crew, made my way through the early sunlight to the tiny, lateen-rigged scow that was the usual means of coastal transport on the cay.

Perhaps because I was happy I expected just too much perfection of the day, yet when Henry sailed over an outcrop of coral and strained a plank a cable's length short of the shore on the far side of the Torrent I was still more exasperated than angry at his carelessness, even though by the time we were halted by the gentle slope of the sand I was up to my ankles in water. I left the apprehensive young negro to carry out the necessary repairs while I sought out the fisherman, Solomon, and when I returned after an hour with a laden basket it was to find that but little progress had been made.

'Do you think we should find another boat?' I asked good-humouredly enough.

Henry rolled huge, worried eyes at me. 'There ain't no other boat here, ma'am. I'll get this one fixed, sure enough.'

I watched him work for a while, wishing very much that there might be something in his handling of his few tools that might inspire me with confidence. It was when it became uncomfortably plain that I faced a hazardous return passage that I looked about me and noticed a similar scow cutting her way through the green water within hailing distance of the shore. I waved and felt a glow of relief as it altered course and came nosing in towards me. But my light-hearted pleasure vanished when I recognised the tall figure at the helm as Farrel.

'You're a long way from home, cousin,' he remarked with some amusement and came wading through the shallows towards me. I saw that he was dressed little better than the single negro who accompanied him—a white cotton shirt and faded blue canvas trousers such as deckhands customarily wear.

I held up my basket in mute testimony of my mission, and Farrel glanced in a swift and calculating fashion at my inept helper. Only then did he raise an arm to summon his man in closer to the shore.

He said lazily, eyeing my bare feet, 'You had best return with me. From a sight of what is going on over there your own boat would do little more than ensure that you drowned in deep water rather than shallow.'

I hesitated for a moment before accepting, hating to be caught at a disadvantage by this man, but then I knew in my heart it would be reckless folly to do otherwise, so I allowed myself to be persuaded.

'It was fortunate that you saw me,' I observed for want of anything better to say, as Farrel settled himself at the tiller and his boy pushed us free of the sand before leaping aboard at the last moment. 'Henry is willing enough, but I think he lacks skill.'

'He'll learn the hard way,' Farrel agreed. 'Although not, I trust, when he has anyone aboard. It was also fortunate that I happened to be passing this way. I've been inspecting one of the kroals where we store the sponges.'

A flying fish leaped from the water and hurled itself a full six feet through the air before vanishing again in a wisp of silver spray. I caught my breath with pleasure at the sight, glancing towards my companion to see if he had noticed it too. But Farrel was staring at the coast with narrowed eyes. I turned and stared with him seeing for the first time we were heading for Gaytons by a different route from that by which I had crossed the Torrent. There was a huddle of small shacks in the centre of a clump of palms, and although there was something vaguely familiar in the sight, it was sometime before I realised that I was staring at the same shanty town at which I had been washed up, coral-torn and half-drowned, on the day I had come to Constantine Cay. I was once more at the place Farrel had called Smithstown. Almost instinctively I gripped the rail.

'What the devil's that sloop doing there?' Farrel leaned forward suddenly, and it was not until then that I too saw the dirty-white painted craft pulled in against the rickety wooden landing stage.

'It's Mr. Williams.' I had spoken the words instinctively, but it was apparent that my companion had recognised it at the same moment as myself.

His scarred face twisted into a smile. 'Our reverend friend seems to be calling the citizens of Smithstown to repentance. Judging from the sound of it I imagine they are not welcoming his ministry.'

The wind had dropped, and as I listened I could hear what his more acute ear had already detected—a babble of shouts and laughter that made me feel suddenly cold and sick with those hideous memories. Whatever Farrel might say about these wretched people being harmless all I could see again was that blur of evil, mindless faces as their owners capered before me. I could almost feel their hands reaching out to touch me, and though I should have felt pity for their condition I was conscious only of revulsion and horror that anyone should find themselves at their mercy, as I had been.

Straining my eyes towards the confused throng on the beach, I said huskily, 'We must help him.'

Farrel's eyes, a moment ago full of scornful humour, were now regarding me with cold appraisal.

'I see no reason to interfere. The fool knows well enough that he has no right to sail in these waters, let alone land. But if he has a mind to convert the ungodly, who am I to interfere?'

'Yet you interfered once before.' I spoke before I could stop myself.

'That was my privilege.' He bowed in mockery of my embarrassment.

But even that action could not stifle my protest at his attitude. 'Whatever you say, I do not believe they are harmless. You have no idea what they could do to that poor man.'

Farrel shrugged his shoulders. 'Our drunken friend may have a taste for martyrdom.'

Much against my will, my eyes were filling with tears. 'You're so cynical,' I cried. 'Do you not care about *anybody?*'

We were standing facing each other in the little boat, like two soldiers lined up in battle. He shook his head as though he did not understand what I was saying.

'Is that what you really think?' he said at last.

In some strange way I felt that he had put me in the wrong. I found I wanted to turn away from this man who had the power to move me to such anger, to disturb me so deeply.

'Very well,' I said stiffly, 'I am aware I cannot force you to do anything against your will. You had best let me ashore to do what little I can. So far as you are concerned, you may stay or go, as you please.'

I know I was trembling as I moved towards the rail, and started to climb into the water, but then his hand was on my bare arm, holding me as if in a vice. 'Have you no idea what you are dealing with, you silly child?'

'You can't stop me,' I almost sobbed. 'You *can't*. You're condemning that old man because he's trying to do what he thinks is right. Someone has to help him.'

Although he still held me, his grip loosened slightly, and he turned me round to face him. I could see he was not scornful any more—there was only bewilderment on his face.

'Truly,' he said, 'I do not know whether to think you are a very brave girl, or a singularly foolish one, for you know well enough that you have no means of controlling that rabble. Let me tell you that I have little against Williams personally, but he is a man who causes trouble wherever he goes. I doubt very much if the trash of Smithstown will do more than ruffle his drunken feathers a little. If they do, it may well discourage a second visit. Your judgment is coloured by your own unpleasant experience.' He seemed to be looking down at me for a long time before he added, 'Nevertheless, if you wish to become involved, I would not cheat you of the experience, although I assure you it will not be an elevating one.' He pushed the tiller over, and in a moment we were heading for the shore.

Well, the die was cast, but strangely I had stopped trembling. I was slowly learning that this bitter perplexing man had a curious effect upon me. I think I realised before we reached land that the situation was closer to Farrel's estimation than my own.

The poor, tattered inhabitants of the settlement were jeering and capering around the Reverend Williams, and he, bottle in hand, was raving back at his tormentors. The sight brought to mind some old bear kept at bay by a pack of yelping dogs, but it was true enough that little physical harm had been done. Yet our very arrival precipitated it.

One of the poor half wits had seen our boat, and at his shout most of his fellows turned to see what had caught his attention. Mr. Williams, in his drunken rage, saw his chance to strike back at least one of his persecutors while his back was turned and—uselessly enough—I cried out at the sight of the rum bottle swinging through the air to descend on a man's unprotected head. There was a moment's silence, and then a cry of fury. With one accord the men of Smithstown surged back and began to attack their victim in earnest.

'Stop that.'

Now that there was danger there for him to see Farrel was swift to act. He vaulted over the gunwale into the waist-deep water and struggled towards the mêlée, and by the time I too had reached the shore I could see him flinging men aside like

dolls in order to reach the bruised and bleeding figure in their midst.

'Leave him alone, damn you!' One ape-like fellow had raised a piece of driftwood like a club, swinging it brutally at Mr. Williams' head, but Farrel felled him with a single blow of his fist. As if that had been a signal the others fell back, their vacant faces filled less with savagery now than shifting expressions of guilt. In ones and twos they turned away and made for their pathetic hovels in a shambling run, leaving their victim crouched on the ground, head in hands. Farrel took him by the shoulder, but he was rewarded by a cry of pain and a thick incoherent mumble.

A jingle of harness caught my attention and I turned my head to see the overseer, Job Stockwell, coming through the trees in a dog cart. At the sight of us a look of surprise and, I think resentment at our presence, crossed his face, but he reined up and came towards us at a run.

'Williams has been asking for trouble and seems to have got his measure of it.' Farrel glanced up briefly. 'You had best go and quieten your people down.'

To give him his due, Stockwell took in the situation readily enough and headed for the shacks, shouting for attention as he went. Then Farrel lifted the groaning figure of the preacher to his feet, supporting him with a strength that surprised me.

'Bring the dog cart over here. He can keep his seat in it with any luck.'

I nodded. 'Where shall we take him? Gaytons?'

'No, he's not a young man, and God knows what damage may have been done him. Take him to Melindo.'

'Melindo?' I had a sudden picture of the pale-coloured, lovely octoroon I had glimpsed that day at the bungalow on the sands, and felt the colour come to my face as I remembered Farrel coming out of the room behind her, a careless, mocking smile on his face.

'Yes. You know where she lives.' Now his face was impassive, although he must have recognised my discomfort. 'You will remember she has ways of healing that are better than many physicians.'

There was something in his manner that discouraged further questioning, and I ran to the pony, leading him on to the sand. Mr. Williams seemed scarcely conscious, but between us we half dragged, half lifted him into the seat. I looked at Farrel. 'And you?'

'I shall follow shortly, as soon as those people are quietened down.'

It could not have been more than two miles to Melindo's house, but it seemed to take an eternity of time, for I was afraid to travel too fast in case my huddled, half-conscious passenger should tip from his seat. He groaned occasionally, but had spoken no word by the time I noticed with thankfulness the low, shingled roof line of the bungalow showing through the trees against its vivid background of hibiscus blooms. I drove the pony up to the verandah and reined to a halt.

'Melindo!'

My voice echoed eerily in the silence, but there was no reply, and after a moment's hesitation I ran up the wooden steps and pushed open the door of the woven palm fronds.

It was cool and dim out of the sun and a few moments passed before my eyes could pick up my surroundings. But when I could make out what kind of room I stood in, the cool turned to icy chill, as though something told me that an evil spirit inhabited this place.

It was bare of furniture, yet alive with a multitude of strange objects that were utterly alien to me. The boards of the floor had been covered with earth, and on this a maze of intricate designs had been laid out with the aid of coloured chalk and gaily tinted sand. Here and there I could recognise creatures such as a grotesque bull and a writhing snake, but for the most part the design seemed to form a circular pattern from which sprang further intricacies at the four points of the compass. Hanging from the rafters of the ceiling and leaning against the walls were heaped baskets, gourds and weirdly shaped objects in wrought iron. Shovels. A large and beautifully carved model of a ship . . .

I don't know why, but I had to get out of that room. It was as if its very air was squeezing the heart out of me.

There was still this oppressive silence, so without formality I pushed open a second door, to find myself in a smaller but more ordinary room, furnished with two or three locally made chairs, a low table and several gaudily coloured rugs tossed down on the rough-hewn plank floor. I was beginning to breathe more freely again when I saw that in one corner that was in shadow, was a strangely incongruous brass bedstead, with something that lay stretched out upon it.

'Melindo . . .'

For a moment I thought she was asleep, for the lines of her body were graceful and relaxed with an almost sensuous ease. Then my eyes took in the fact that her eyes were open sightlessly, and her neck twisted at a strange angle. I had not seen death before, but I discovered in that long moment that it was easy enough to recognise.

I do not know how long it was I stayed there, rooted in horror to the spot, but somehow I stumbled out into the sunshine again, through that other door that seemed like a doorway to death.

Mr. Williams had relapsed into unconsciousness, and I stood for a while, holding on to the edge of the dog cart while my legs shook and the taste in my mouth was dry and bitter. I wished to fly from the place, but I had not the strength to move, so that even when I heard the sound of a horse galloping along the way I had come I did not raise my head. Only when Farrel's hand fell on my shoulder did I look up and point wordlessly at the house.

He left me swiftly and went towards the bungalow, and, driven perhaps by some fear of being left alone, I followed him to the edge of the outer room. When he came back to me he nodded, but his eyes were closed for a moment before he said in a low, bitter voice, 'Yes, she is dead. Her neck is broken.'

He stood silently for a moment, watching me, so that I could not control the trembling of my body.

'There is a lot here you do not understand,' he said.

I nodded, my voice choking a little, 'I'm beginning to realise that.'

'Poor little cousin, there has been much to upset you this morning.'

I looked around me at the outer room, at all the strange objects there that filled me with almost as much revulsion as the poor dead girl on the bed. 'What does all this mean?' I said at last.

'I forget,' he said with an attempt at a smile, 'what a child you are. You would know nothing of *obeah*.'

'*Obeah*,' I repeated. 'Of course.' Something in my manner made my companion raise his eyebrows in surprise.

'I see I do you an injustice. I had not suspected that young Englishwomen were so well-informed.'

It seemed curious then that he should take time at such a moment to speak of anything other than the silent thing lying on the bed in the next room, but later I guessed that he wished only to occupy my mind and I was grateful for that.

I found myself thinking of the Reverend Williams drinking rum in the stuffy cabin of his sloop, with the little twisted shape of the joujou on the table between us. The preacher had hinted at danger then, just as I had sensed it in the air ever since I landed at Constantine Cay. So this was what it had all meant. Not just an interesting superstition unearthed by someone who had made a study of the folklore of the islands, but something real and terribly tangible. And yet, I asked myself, what had this to do with me?

I said slowly, feeling each word dragged from me, 'I have heard of obeah—yes. It is what they call voodoo in Haiti. A kind of religion. With spells. A devil worship.'

'A religion, yes. Not altogether devil worship. A hotch-potch of primitive beliefs from Africa and half a dozen other countries.' Farrel looked about him. 'It is a faith of magic, with its followers believing in a kind of personal possession by the spirits of the dead. With the bringing back to life of the dead by sorcery. Much of it is a kind of foul blasphemy, but over the people here it has total power.'

'And . . . and Melindo?'

'She was a priestess—a Mam'bo. This is her *humfo*, or place of worship. These chalk signs on the floor are known as a *veve* and in their centre is where the sacrifices take place.'

I asked huskily, 'What do they sacrifice?'

Farrel grimaced. 'Cocks, pigeons. Not humans, so far as I know. At least, not in this century.' He touched an iron cross, surmounted by a crude B. and S. 'The sign of Baron Samedi. He is the master of ceremonies—the lord of the zombies, the living dead.'

'And the boat?'

'So far as I remember it is called Erzulie's Boat. I think the initiate's soul is carried on it to a place called "The City of the Camps", but I'm not sure.' He paused for a moment. 'One finds out very little, unless one is black.'

But suddenly I was no longer listening to his words. The whole impact of what had happened in this dreadful place struck me with almost physical force. In spite of myself I turned and stumbled out and down from the verandah, deathly sick. Farrel came up behind me and I felt his arms round my shoulders, holding me tight.

'I had thought to help, but in my clumsy way I have not. I'm sorry. It was not a pleasant sight. Forget it if you can.'

Forget it I could not, but I know that I was glad of the comfort of his arm about my shoulders, and after a little while I started to cry . . .

9

I CANNOT PRETEND that the following morning saw me arise with any great desire to return to Smithstown, yet try as I might I could not drive the thought of the Reverend Williams from my mind.

After the awful events of yesterday I had not expected to sleep, but sleep I did heavily, so that not even the memory of Melindo's recumbent body had disturbed my dreams. It was as though my mind had cut off from the horror and my practical self had moved forward, knowing that at least if she was past help, the Reverend Williams was not.

I had not thought that Farrel could melt enough to talk to me like a tired child, soothing away my fears, holding me still until my tears had ceased. But he had and I believed I had glimpsed something of the man behind the mask. He then saw my desperate need to make myself useful and brought out from the house water, clean rags and then some ointment that smelt of herbs, so that I might tend the ugly bruise on the old man's head.

As Mr. Williams started to regain consciousness and was obviously more stunned than seriously hurt, we drove him back to the shore, to his sloop, and handed him over to his crew. Where, I wondered, were they when their master was in trouble? Farrel told them to carry their master down to his cabin and make him some kind of soothing drink.

Farrel and I had then turned again towards the bungalow but before we reached it he put me on the road to Gaytons

while he, I suppose, went to do what had to be done in that place of evil. We did not talk much and yet, for the first time there was no feeling of antagonism between us, as if the incidents of the morning had in some way drawn us into a closer understanding. But before we parted, he said a strange thing.

'Go back and tell them at the house what has taken place.' And then, with a distant smile, a look that I could not fully comprehend, he added, 'It is after all a good thing you came to Gaytons, Cousin Trudy. I begin to think that if we Constantines were to remain cloistered in our prison for long enough, we might not be all that far removed from those wretched creatures at Smithstown. But you have brought a little sense into our lives, a little compassion. For myself ...' But then his voice roughened. 'Go now, for I have work to do.'

I thought about his words and found myself ridiculously pleased, as if to win his esteem was important. But even so I could still picture Farrel's scorn if he knew I intended to visit the unhappy old preacher. But I guessed him to be alone and friendless, treated by all with universal derision. Besides, I felt that in some measure I could be blamed for his injuries ...

So I approached Ham, the giant house negro, and asked that he would accompany me. He had, I knew, no duties until it was time for luncheon and I had no desire to face the inhabitants of Smithstown again without adequate bodyguard.

'And remember,' I cautioned him, 'that this is a matter for the two of us, Ham. I do not care to have my business bandied about behind my back.'

His good-humoured black face split into a grin. 'That's all right, Mis' Trudy. You an' me just goin' off somewhere on our own. Ain't no reason why other folks should hear about it.'

I felt a sudden surge of gratitude towards him. Ham was, I thought, the only person at Gaytons who seemed to be prepared to give me unquestioning support, something I needed more, I think, than I cared to admit.

'Is there a dog cart we could take?'

'There sure is. An' don't worry 'bout anyone seeing. If you

wants to pick up a thing or two for th' kitchen, nobody think nothin' if Ham drive you around.'

It was sensible enough advice, and so far as I knew we were unobserved as we left the grounds, although with Ham's advice in mind I had a basket with me in order at least to suggest a reason for the expedition. Ham drove quietly and well, and with his reassuring presence at my side I found it easy enought to enjoy the ride.

On our arrival at Smithstown we made our way towards the white painted sloop that was tied up just as I had last seen her, against the rotting timbers of the quay. In the background I could imagine a score of eyes watching my progress from inside the shanties, but apparently the sight of Ham leaning negligently against the wheel of the cart while I climbed the gangway, discouraged closer investigation.

I called out uncertainly: 'Mr. Williams—may I come aboard?'

I hoped I would not have to go down once more into that stuffy, confining little cabin, and, to my relief his disreputable figure appeared on the steps of the companionway.

'What do you want?'

There was a heaviness about the tone that seemed almost more saddening than the drink-inspired aggression that was the other side of his character. Certainly there was little in his bloodshot eyes but physical pain and a self-knowledge of degradation.

He still wore the stained, once white, cotton suit of the previous day, and one side of his face was swollen to almost twice its normal size. But at least the livid bruises on his cheekbones were clean and I felt satisfied that no permanent damage had been caused. There was a certain courtesy in the way he gave me a small bow that I found curiously touching. So far as he was concerned, I was a Constantine, and any facile sympathy I might offer could do little to overcome the fact that I represented a family he had little reason to love.

'I . . . I came to see if you had recovered,' I answered him.

A flicker of amusement touched his cut lips. 'And to ensure that there is nothing to stop me returning from whence I came I presume.'

'No.' I shook my head. 'I had hoped that by now you would have realised that your ... treatment here is none of my doing.'

He studied me for a moment then his eyes fell and he made a small, ineffectual gesture with his hands. 'I realise well enough, ma'am. If it had not been for your timely intervention, and your ministrations, my injuries might well have been more severe than they were. But you must have seen an injured dog. He snaps at everyone, including the master who only wishes to help him.'

He was sober and I wondered at the craving for a glass of spirits he must have been experiencing, both to deaden the pain and perhaps to dull the awareness of what he had become.

'I had been across the Torrent and saw what was happening. As Captain Constantine was with me, I told ...' I stopped. 'Told' was hardly a suitable word, and I went on haltingly, 'I suggested ...'

Mr. Williams's features moved painfully with the hint of a smile. 'I should imagine "told" is accurate enough. It would need more than a suggestion to summon that gentleman to my aid, unless I am much mistaken. He has something of the arrogance of his father, if not other more ... distasteful qualities.' His eyes clouded as though he had forgotten I was there. 'One day I will show those Constantines ... I will tell them just who they have to reckon with.' He laughed, almost a cackle of glee. 'How I would wish to see that old rogue's face when I say just who I ...'

He stopped abruptly. I had not the least idea of what he was talking, but I was quick to rise to Farrel's defence. 'Captain Constantine would not stand by and watch anyone suffer at the hands of a mob. Even ...'

'Even someone as unwelcome as myself?' The old man stirred carefully and turned away, staring down into the matchlessly clear water. 'My dear lady, let us be honest. I went ashore knowing well enough that the old Colonel would not raise a hand on my behalf unless it was to strike me. But I make no excuse for doing my best to spread the Lord's word among unhappy men much in need of its comfort. I

fear I lack the necessary courage for martyrdom, but a few blows taken for the faith are neither here nor there.'

Almost unconsciously, I reached out and touched his arm. 'And, truly, you are strong enough to make your way back to Nassau?'

'Oh yes. My two boys are ashore somewhere getting themselves some food. We can set sail as soon as they return.' He turned back from his contemplation of the sea, his eyes meeting mine. 'You are a strange young woman, if I may say so. What are you doing in this unhappy place?'

I did my best to dismiss the question with a laugh. 'Making myself useful, I hope.'

'And that is all?' This time his eyes did not leave mine. 'You have the air of a woman with questions to ask. What is it you wish to know?'

I stood beside him, silent. It was true that there were many things about Constantine Cay that I needed answering, but the question that came to my lips was one that had been with me for sometime now.

'People tell me that you have made a study of these islands and the ships that have foundered here.'

He raised his head a little, as though in spite of himself his interest was stirred.

'That is so.' Then he shrugged his shoulders. 'Not that it is all that difficult a feat. There are old charts, and local legends. And with waters as clear as these a man can locate much for himself.'

'Did you ever hear of the wreck of the *Santa Anna*?'

'The Spanish silver galleon? Indeed, I did, ma'am.' Perhaps because of his interest, a hint of his native Welsh had crept into his speech.

'Did she truly sink in these waters?'

'She went down three hundred years ago,' he told me with complete authority. 'And strangely enough one may be more sure of that than of many a recent disaster. The Spaniards bled the Indies white, but they were good accountants. They knew to a *reale* the value of each cargo, and before a treasure fleet sailed for home a messenger was sent on ahead with a description of what was to come. It served a

double purpose, you understand—it allowed the Treasury to plan ahead, anticipating its income, and also it acted as a check on individual captains.'

'I should hardly have imagined,' I put in, 'that any captain would have been reckless enough to try to steal one of his own ships.'

'These were not just rich cargoes. They were consignments of bar silver and bar gold. They were worth many millions of dollars.' Mr. Williams hesitated, as though seeking adequate words. 'You have been gently brought up, ma'am, and can have seen little of the wickedness of the world. Most men love gold more than they fear the Lord.'

I found myself wondering at the sudden intensity that had come into his voice and, anxious to calm him, I asked quickly, 'And the Spaniards agreed that the *Santa Anna* had been lost?'

'I doubt if the news was spread at the time, for often enough they had their own plans for recovery. But later the records were found, mouldering in some office. It was an item of news that made no great stir. There may be a wreck or two left in the world ripe for salvage but the *Santa Anna* is not one of them.'

I waited, tensely.

Mr. Williams laughed. 'She was empty when she went down.'

For a moment I said nothing, trying to take in the meaning of what he had just said. 'But if she was part of the treasure fleet . . .'

'It was all in some book written by a German, fifty years ago. The *Santa Anna* started off with bullion enough, but it seems from the records that after a few weeks at sea she sprang so many timbers in a gale that her captain was afraid she would sink under him. So, to lighten her and safeguard the bullion, the gold and silver was taken out and distributed among the other ships in the fleet, so that the *Anna* could put in to make repairs.'

'And did she,' I leaned forward, waiting for his answer.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Apparently there is no record of that. But probably not, as it may well have been why she

fell a victim to the hurricane she met in these parts. She sank all right, five miles north of Eleuthera, according to Don Gomez, her captain, who somehow managed to swim ashore.'

By now I was staring at him wide-eyed. 'Five miles north of Eleuthera? But that's impossible! That's nowhere near . . .' I broke off, fearful that in my surprise at the news I might say too much.

Mr. Williams must have caught the agitation in my voice, for he turned and eyed me suspiciously. 'And why, ma'am, do you say it is impossible?' Then I saw a look of sudden understanding come into his eyes. 'Ah, someone spoke to me about a friend of the Constantines—some wrecker—trying his luck off Constantine Cay. You are surely not trying to tell me that he thinks the *Santa Anna* went down there?'

There seemed little point in denying the fact now. A little defensively, I said, 'Captain Fernac seems very confident that he's looking in the right place.'

Mr. Williams made a gesture of impatience. 'Then the man's a fool—or the Constantines are, for encouraging him. Any child who's been born around the sponge crews could tell him as much. Oh, I'm not saying there's nothing there. Some blockade runner or other went down during the war. Nobody ever found the exact spot, but that's where the wrecker is working, sure enough. Good luck to him, if he can bring up a case of bourbon or two—but even that I doubt, for if my memory serves me right it went down in a bad storm and there were no more than two or three survivors. But there's no *Santa Anna* there, ma'am, I swear by the living God!'

As I made my way back to Gaytons, my mind was in a whirl. That old Reddish Constantine could have been in error seemed not impossible, for he was, after all, a stranger to the islands and, trapped in his chair, could have had little opportunity for sifting rumour from fact. But for Raoul, with *his* knowledge of these waters, to have made such a glaring error seemed beyond belief.

Leaving Ham at the stables I went to my room to wash the dust from my face and hands, and as I dried them there came a light tap on the door. I called out that whoever was

there should enter and Matthew came in. He was dressed for riding, and there was a curiously defiant air about him that gave me a sense of wariness even before he opened his mouth.

'Why the breeches, Matthew?' I tried to sound casual, but guessed he would see through my play-acting. 'Was it not arranged that we should do our lessons in the morning?'

'It was arranged but I ask you to excuse me. I have something else to attend to.' And then, as though his carefully rehearsed composure had been able to last only so long, he went on with a rush: 'Trudy—something terrible has happened. A woman over at Smithstown was killed yesterday—murdered, Mr. Stockwell says—so we are all going to find the man who did it.'

'And who did do it?' I know I sounded sharp, but the memory of yesterday returned with full force, and I could not bear the boy to sound so ghoulish.

'Oh, they are sure who did it,' Matthew replied calmly. 'And I agree with them.' I was shocked to see something very like pleasure in his face as he added with evident satisfaction, 'It was Malachi.'

I suppose I too was startled out of my usual self, because now I told him roughly not to be a little savage. I knew well enough that for some deep reason of his own he disliked and feared the big negro, but the sight of a child relishing such news filled me with disgust. Besides, it was quite unlike Matthew.

'You're speaking wicked nonsense,' I snapped at him. 'How does anyone know that Malachi did it?'

'Because he's run away,' he returned sulkily. 'Why should he do that otherwise?'

I remember that I had asked Mother Moti to call Malachi the morning after Matthew's sleepwalking episode, for I had wanted to thank him for his help. And although I had thought nothing more about it at the time, it was true that he had not come. I thought of the huge unexpectedly gentle figure, with the voice that rang deep as a great bell. I knew nothing of murderers, but it seemed inconceivable to me that Malachi might be one.

'And what is it you plan to do this morning,' I heard myself demanding harshly. 'You and "the others"?'

There was still defiance in the way he lifted his chin as he said, 'We're riding south through the fields with the dogs. If he's hiding out in the tobacco we're bound to flush him out.'

I closed my eyes, struggling for control. *Flush him out.* Ten years old and he was talking about flushing a fellow human being as though he were game. 'Who is "we"?' I managed at last.

'Uncle Farrel, Mr. Lavenham, Stockwell and myself.'

'And why,' I enquired with a touch of sarcasm, 'has Captain Fernac been missed out of the day's sport?'

'Uncle Farrel said we could hardly ask him, because Malachi was his man.'

'Your Uncle Farrel,' I said bitingly, 'is growing over fastidious. Meanwhile, you can take those clothes off and go to the schoolroom as we arranged.'

He did not move, but looked me straight in the eye. Then in a voice that chilled me he said, 'I want Malachi caught. He's murdered before, you know.'

I should not have struck him, but it was done before I realised that I had raised my hand. Matthew put his hand to his cheek and his face went very white. Then all at once his eyes filled with tears and he became a small boy again, and rushed sobbing from the room.

Without probing too deeply into my emotions, but knowing that the temper my father said had been inherited from him, was dangerously near explosion point, I went downstairs and out to the stables. I know that had some weapon been to hand at that moment I should have had little compunction in using it, but fortunately, my hands were clenched only on themselves as I came to where the three men were standing by their horses.

It was Farrel who was nearest, and he must have read my feelings readily enough, for his own face was like stone as he said curtly, 'Well, cousin, where is the boy?'

'He is not coming.'

'And why may I ask, since I ordered him to be here?'

'He is on his way to the schoolroom,' I retorted, 'which is

the proper place for a child to be.' I sensed rather than saw the others listening and had enough control left to lower my voice. 'For pity's sake, to hunt a man with dogs and on horseback is barbarous enough without involving children. Do you wish your nephew to grow up a monster?'

'Such as myself?'

'I am not concerned with your conscience,' I said savagely. 'You can turn back the clock to the Dark Ages for all I care, but I cannot have you dragging Matthew into this filthy business.'

For a long moment Farrel said nothing, but as he stood looking at me I saw that his face was pale beneath its heavy tan and his scar stood out lividly. Why, I asked myself, were we once again locked in battle? Was it really only yesterday that I had seen a gentler side to his nature?

Then he said in the same tense voice, 'It's not a pretty business, I'll grant you, but if the boy has been brought out here to learn to trade, then it's best he learn it from day to day. Catching a murderer may not be pleasant, and if you're squeamish, cousin, then you'd best look the other way. But you are doing Matthew no favour either, as you would know well enough had you more experience of life. Your young brother has a man's task ahead of him. God knows it's not my choice that he's here, but since he is I'll not stand by and see you whine and snivel over him the moment the job doesn't go according to the picture books.'

'You're jealous of him, aren't you?' The words were out before I could stop them. I heard the harsh intake of his breath and met the glitter of those eyes, before I half-recoiled, thinking it was his turn to strike.

Suddenly the evil of this place was all around me. If Matthew could be corrupted, then perhaps I was the next. The sun, the palm trees stirring lazily against a background of brilliant blue sky suddenly ceased to be beautiful and instead became snares, full of something sick that seemed to reach out to stifle me. Perhaps I could still fight it, but for the first time I realised with terrifying clarity that I must fight it for Matthew too.

'No,' said Farrel, smiling without humour. 'I have not yet

been provoked into striking a woman. But remember—*you* can hit out with words. Think on that, cousin.' He seemed to relax, moving away from me. 'So be it. Leave us to our business. The brat may stay with his Latin and Greek.' He swung himself easily into the saddle. 'Sometime, cousin, you and I must strike a bargain—I cannot allow you always to win. It is not in my nature.'

To my surprise the smile he gave me, swift though it was seemed genuine enough, and I found myself mumbling words of apology. 'I ... I'm sorry, I should not have spoken as I did.'

'Better to speak out than let the wound fester inside. Better to have spirit than ...' I did not know what he was about to say, for he had pulled on the rein and was riding to join the others.

I had no stomach for watching them leave, for I had caught the look on Stockwell's coarse features. Besides, one half of me was confused, while the other knew exactly what I was going to do.

It took me some time to find Mother Moti, but I discovered her at last in the great linen closet at the head of the back stairs.

Without preamble, I asked her: 'Where is Malachi hiding?'

There was no reason for supposing that she might know more than any of the other servants, but emotion had given me a kind of clairvoyance.

'Miss Trudy, ah haven't seen ...'

But I would not be turned aside. I had never in my life seen any person face me with fear before, but I spoke to her with what was in my heart and if it was not fear I saw in her eyes, it was something very like it.

It was only when she told me what it was I wished to know that the force of Matthew's words returned to me, the significance of which had escaped me until now.

'I want Malachi caught. He has murdered before, you know.'

10

IT WAS LATE afternoon by the time the sound of horses in the stable yard told me that Farrel and his men had returned. I had no means of knowing the result of their search, but as I went out into the sun, one glance at Farrel's face was enough to assure me that the hunt had been in vain.

When he saw me he gave a smile that was full of irony. 'Well, cousin, you will doubtless be pleased that your fox has gone to earth.' Charles and Stockwell were presumably still in the stables, so the two of us were alone, standing in the shadow of the giant cotton silk tree that overhung the store houses.

'Yes, I'm pleased.' I met his glance readily enough. 'Not because of what he might have done. But he is a man. There's no reason to hunt him like an animal. Besides,' I added, 'you still cannot be sure he is guilty.'

I really believe he did not know what to make of me, for he continued to study me with an expression strangely enigmatic. I had a sudden wish that we had met under different circumstances, for I think we might have been friends. The feelings we roused in each other were not true antagonism, but the kind of honesty we found ourselves forced to express. But it seemed to take a foul murder to seek out the warmer side of his nature, to make me realise that Farrel was probably as lonely as I was, only both of us were too proud to admit it.

Now, as he still watched me with those speculative eyes I

found myself wondering if he guessed that I might have been in some way instrumental in his failure to find Malachi. My face, I knew, lacked the necessary passivity that is the tool in trade of the good liar, and I could remember only too well the few minutes that had passed immediately after I had watched Farrel and the others ride away earlier that day.

I had gone back to the still cool porch where the family took its breakfast, filled with a sudden compulsion to seek help. But apart from a house girl humming abstractedly to herself as she fiddled with the ribbons of her apron, the place had been deserted. It was Raoul I had wanted, and I knew from experience that he held all the Creole gentleman's distaste for early rising.

I took a sudden decision. 'Where is Captain Fernac's room?'

The girl had stopped humming and gazed at me, wide-eyed, startled by the sharpness of my tone.

'Yuh want th' captain's room?'

'That is what I said.' I had controlled myself with an effort. 'Quickly,' I demanded 'which is it?'

'It's th' one across the landin' from the Colonel's, ma'am.'

Heedless of the fool's curious glances I ran in the direction she had indicated. The door leading to Reddish Constantine's room I remembered well enough, and chicken-brained though the house girl might have been there was no mistaking the one to which she referred.

I hardly paused, knowing that if I did I should be so appalled at my own forwardness that I would lose courage immediately.

'Come in.'

I had been surprised to have my knock answered so quickly and deeply relieved that he was up, standing by the window, studying a map, so absorbed that at first he had not looked up at my timid entry. He was wearing only boots and breeches, with a silk robe thrown over his shoulders, so that I could not but notice the heavy muscles above the narrow waist. When he had at last looked up it was without any particular embarrassment, or surprise, putting down the chart and coming over to me unhurriedly, as though my presence

in his room at that hour of the morning was the most natural thing in the world.

'Good morning.' And then as he had noted my expression: 'There is something the matter?'

I blurted out the situation to him clumsily enough and an expression of cold anger crossed his face.

'You were right to come to me. I have a distaste for the Constantine family putting up one of my men as if he were a fox.' He had thrown aside the robe and snatched up a shirt. 'Tell me quickly now—where is this place the old woman says he hides?'

'It seems she has a son called Thomas who lives with his wife on the edge of the beach beyond the quay. They will hide him all right, but they won't be expecting anyone out searching at this time of the day. If they are caught with him . . .' I hesitated and Raoul had completed the thought for me.

'You are right. Doubtless they will hang them too.' He frowned, considering the matter. 'You have a horse? One that you usually ride, that is?'

I nodded. 'Yes.'

'Then you shall lead me to him. You had best go now to the stables so that the boys do not ask questions. I shall be with you in a little while.'

There was something about his manner that had not invited questions, so I had obeyed his instructions without protest.

With my mind fully occupied with what was on hand I had simply left his room, and it had not been until I turned from closing the door behind me that I had spared a moment to glance towards the head of the stairs. When I did so, it was to see Lucy there against the balustrade, rigid, her eyes full of black hatred.

'Lucy,' I said sharply, but she had turned away and fled down the stairs, leaving me staring after her in dismay. I think at any other time I would have followed her with explanations, but at that moment it seemed to matter very little that she or anyone else should have seen me leaving a man's bedroom in the early morning. All I wanted to do was to get Raoul a horse, and when, ten minutes later, I watched him

urging his mount away from the stables and out onto the white, sandy track that led to the quay I was conscious only of a sense of relief that had been intense enough to drive all thought of Lucy from my mind.

Now, standing close to Farrel, I could not help feeling a fierce pride in the thought I had outwitted him. Raoul had returned a good hour back, and although I had had no opportunity to speak with him I felt confident enough that his mission had been successful.

Strangely enough I found myself wanting to tell Farrel what I had done, willing him to understand my motives, but I knew I could not go so far as that.

'I suppose,' he said slowly, 'this man Malachi is holed up somewhere?'

'If he is,' I retorted, 'I can only hope he has the sense to stay there until he can get out of your way for good.'

'He'll be a fool to let himself be caught by anyone else.' Farrel regarded me with something akin to pity. 'Great heavens, girl, must you be such a fool? You didn't really suppose we were going to hang the poor brute, did you?'

'I should not be in the least surprised,' I told him. Then I saw there was a strange sort of humour in his regard, as if he were actually laughing at me. I did not know what to make of this at all, and rushed headlong into speaking my impulsive thoughts. 'Oh, you may not hang him with your own hands, but if Charles hands him over to the authorities it will come to the same thing. And I can scarcely imagine you would be over-anxious to announce to the world that you were charging a man for killing your mistress.'

I had wished to drive my point home, and it seemed that I could hardly have done it better, for I felt the man beside me start. The flash of humour I had glimpsed was gone on his face jerked round in my direction.

'My mistress?' He stared at me for a long moment, then said slowly, 'I confess that was a conclusion that had escaped me. You have an even more vivid imagination than I gave you credit for, cousin. And what was the motive for this crime of passion, may I ask?'

'Presumably the same as in most cases of that nature,' I told him. I know my cheeks were flushed and my breath was

coming very fast, but this man seemed to force the truth out of me, however unpleasant it was.

'For God's sake, Trudy,' Farrel was snarling at me, yet I still noted that he made a rare use of my name, 'stop talking like a fool. Do you seriously imagine that I would take myself a coloured girl under the shadow of my own roof? That I would parade a black wench before my womenfolk like some damned jumped-up Yankee?' He stopped abruptly and put a hand to his head with a gesture of irritation. 'Almost you make me speak like my father.'

The force behind his words startled me, as though in some way I had at last touched some inner core of the man that was capable of real feeling.

We stood facing each other, as it seemed we had done so many times before and I knew my breast was rising and falling with the depth of my emotion, yet I hoped I managed to control the tremor in my voice as I said in apology, 'If I spoke in error, I shall be happy to withdraw my words, but ... but you can scarcely blame me for drawing a conclusion that seemed clear for all to see. As you told me, there is so much on Constantine Cay I do not understand, but I find an undercurrent that makes it like no other place I have visited. If there is another reason for what Malachi did, I would ask you to tell me of it.'

It seemed a long time before he spoke, but his eyes never left me, as if he were still making an assessment of me.

'It is likely,' he said at last, 'that you will find the real reason little more to your taste than the ingenious theory you have concocted.'

'Should I not be the best judge of that?' I said quietly.

'As you will.' He shrugged his shoulders, as though ridding himself of an unasked-for responsibility. Then he went on: 'The girl meant no more to me than a means to an end. As you are aware, I have a fleet of boats to man, which is not easy in these parts. Before anyone would work for me I had to have someone who would use some influence on my behalf. Melindo had that influence.'

'You mean,' I said, 'that she *told* them to work for you?'

'You can hardly imagine,' he said curtly, 'that I should have got the work out of them that I did without *someone's*

help. The Bahamian does as little work as possible, not as much. In the old days a skipper kept his crew busy by making sure they were in debt. Since I choose not to rob them, I had to find other ways to impress on them the need for a full day's work. I confess that the problem defeated me, till I discovered that Melindo had means of making them ... change their views.'

I suppose it was a plausible enough answer. I could well imagine that with an *obeah* priestess to speak on his behalf, Farrel would have had little difficulty in wielding almost limitless power. It explained how he had managed to form such a successful fleet in a short time and contrary to everyone else's experience in the islands, keep the indolent pleasure-loving Bahamians working. It even explained his influence, his power and even the contempt with which he felt able to regard the rest of his family. The only thing that it did not make clear was why Melindo had been prepared to ally herself with a stranger in the first place.

Farrel was eyeing me narrowly as if he were challenging me to ask the question that was obviously trembling on the tip of my tongue. His anticipation of my embarrassment acted as a goad and I found myself saying firmly, 'And what were you able to do for Melindo in return for her remarkable services?'

With raised eyebrows, but in a wild voice he replied, 'I did not become her lover, as you still most clearly imagine.'

My cheeks were now scarlet, but it was too late to draw back.

'Then what did you do?'

'I offered her security.'

It was not the answer I had anticipated, and I stared at him in bewilderment. 'What kind of security? Money? A home?'

He was smiling openly now, mocking me perhaps, and yet I felt not.

'You are indeed a persistent young woman ... tenacious, one might say. No wonder you have caught my father's admiration. If you must know, I provided Melindo with security for her religion—her stock-in-trade—call it what you will. Your hell fire friend, the Reverend Williams, has succeeded

in well nigh banishing *obeah* from most of the islands around here, and Melindo had no fancy to see the same thing happen at Constantine Cay. So in return for her services I kept the drunken fellow away.'

For a moment I found it hard to say anything, but at length I managed to ask: 'And is your family aware of this ... this arrangement?'

'I very much doubt it,' he said carelessly.

I sought words to express my feelings, but they proved inadequate, and I said weakly, 'It seems a terrible thing to do. You have told me yourself that *obeah* is an evil thing. How can you find it in yourself to encourage it?'

'My business,' he said evenly, 'is to make money. A pursuit, I may say, that everyone finds mightily convenient.' For a moment I thought he was about to berate me with my dependence on him, but instead he went on, 'Listen to me, Trudy, before you offer me your schoolroom lectures. God knows why that fool Malachi killed the girl—if he did—but I promise you that he won't live a day once his "friends" here ferret him out. And *I* was not hunting him to hang him. I wanted to get him off the island and save his black hide, that's all.'

In that moment I knew he spoke the truth. In return, I had to show him the same kind of honesty.

I said bluntly: 'I told Raoul where he was. He has gone to look after him.'

Farrel stared down at me and then threw back his head and laughed. 'So you knew all the time. I was right not to under-estimate you. It seems that you have a rare gift for persuading men to carry out your wishes. You are indeed a most unusual woman.' He paused, his eyes turning from mine to stare out over the trees, sharply etched against the late afternoon sky. 'You do not fear for yourself, then?' he said slowly. He had turned back to me and had it been anyone else but Farrel I would have imagined a softening in his expression, but I was on guard against any notion he might weaken.

'For myself?' I shook my head. 'No, why should I?'

'Some would say it was not wise to dabble in the ways of these people. I sometimes think that if they wish to butcher each other it is best not to become involved.'

'But you yourself have made use of their superstitions.'

'True. But then I have a massive indifference as to what fate may have in store for me. And I would doubt if your life has yet schooled you to such an admirable philosophy.' The bantering tone dropped away from him suddenly, and he touched my shoulder briefly with the silver handle of his crop. 'But watch yourself in the dark hours of the night, cousin. There can be worse things to haunt one's sleep than dreams, as well I know.'

I would have asked him what he had meant by that, but he turned on his heel and strode swiftly back towards the stables, leaving me to wonder at his words and then to make my way slowly to the kitchens and the business of the day, for I had need to make the journey to Nassau on the following morning to order provisions.

The expedition was one that called for serious planning with Alice, yet I found I could not concentrate on the work for thinking over my talk with Farrel. Each time we had met he surprised me a little more. It was like trying to find my way through a labyrinth.

I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I quite forgot about Raoul and his errand until I came upon him at the foot of the stairs before dinner that night.

'You have no need to worry,' he said, leading me aside, 'our friend is out of harm's way.'

I felt a surge of relief. 'Thank you, Raoul. Where is he?'

'On the *Minator* by now. Where else?'

Again I offered my thanks for his speedy action and then he barred my way to the stairs. 'Someone said that you were going to Nassau tomorrow. Is that true?'

I nodded. 'Yes, that is so. There are many things we need for the kitchen.' And then, because I imagined that it was the reason for his asking, 'Is there any purchase I may make for you?'

'There is nothing I wish you to bring, but there is a small thing I would ask you to take for me. And deliver, also, if you will.'

'I should be happy to.'

He smiled, a little strangely. 'With discretion, you understand.'

I nodded, but I wondered what it was I would be carrying. 'And where am I to deliver it?' I asked.

'It is to go to a man named Sadgrove. He has an office at Government House, which you can reach well enough from Bay Street.'

'Of course I will take it for you.' At that moment it did not occur to me to refuse, and yet even as I spoke I was conscious of the fact that I was being used as a tool in something to which I was no party. I think something of my doubt showed in my eyes, for Raoul's attitude stiffened a little, and he said quietly, 'You will take this, since I have asked it of you, but I think you would rather not.'

I hesitated for a moment, while I tried to get my thoughts in order. Then I said simply, 'It is not that I mind acting as your messenger; it is just that I wish you felt as ready to trust me as I am to trust you.'

Raoul frowned and his dark eyes stared questioningly into mine. 'I do not understand you, Trudy. It is surely clear that I trust you. What is it your woman's curiosity desires? To know what it is I send by your hand?'

I tried to laugh, but made a poor show of it. 'No,' I confessed, 'I don't very much care what it is you are sending to Nassau. But my woman's curiosity, as you call it, makes me wonder what it is you do here on Constantine Cay.'

I think, although I could not be sure, that Raoul hesitated for a brief instant. But when his answer came the words were smooth enough.

'I have already told you what I am doing here.' Then, when I made no comment: 'You have doubts that I am working on the wreck of the *Santa Anna*?'

I nodded without speaking.

For a moment he stared at me, puzzled, I think, 'But, my Trudy, why? Do you wish to dive down and see for yourself that she is where I say she is?'

I drew a deep breath and said steadily. 'Raoul, I know you are not diving on the *Santa Anna*. Because she never sank off Constantine Cay. If there is anything left of her at all, it lies a good thirty miles away from here.'

In a strange voice Raoul asked softly, 'And how can you be so sure of that?'

For a moment I thought I saw anger flash across his eyes, and I felt a cold finger of fear touch my heart. No man likes his movements to be questioned by a woman. Once again I had let my unwary tongue run away with me. Then the look was gone as quickly as it had come and he was smiling again, shrugging his shoulders in a swift Gallic gesture of indifference.

'If you are sure, then it does not matter. I admit, I thought it was the *Santa Anna* down there. The old man was very convincing. But God knows it is easy enough to make mistakes after three hundred years.' His voice hardened. 'But this I tell you, Trudy. There *is* a ship down there, and a worth while one at that. And if I can bring up her cargo she can be named after the devil himself for all I care.'

His very readiness to accept my doubts threw me into momentary confusion. I had, I supposed, attached too much importance to the identity of the sunken ship, forgetful of the fact that to one who earned his livelihood from what he could reap from the sea, the identity of a ship was of little enough interest compared with her possible worth. Reddish Constantine had told Raoul that there was gold for the taking off the coast of Constantine Cay, and if he was proved right, then Raoul was hardly likely to worry himself about much else.

'Forgive me,' I said, 'it was just that you seemed so certain about the *Santa Anna*, and then . . . all at once . . .'

'You think perhaps I charge the Colonel for seeking a ship that does not exist?'

I managed to laugh. 'Of course not, but I thought perhaps you could both be mistaken.'

He stood as though studying me for a moment, then he took my hands in his, touching each of my fingers lightly. I had noticed his hands before, long-fingered and slender but with a steely strength I could sense even now. I trembled a little under his touch, thinking he was going to draw me towards him.

'My Trudy,' he said, in that same, strange soft voice, 'you would do well to remember that all men are not such as I, that your inquisitive nature is better left back in the schoolroom.' For a moment his hands tightened, then fell away sud-

denly. 'You are, after all, wondering what it is I send to this mysterious Master Sadgrove.'

'No,' I protested, '*please*, it does not matter that I know.' It was not what I wanted, to be treated as the inquisitive governess. I wished I had kept all my doubts to myself, but it was too late to draw back.

He brushed across my protests, reaching in his pocket to reveal a brown leather purse. 'It is important that we should trust one another, you and I. And since you carry this on my behalf you would not be a woman if you were not curious. So ... you carry a few trinkets brought up from the bed of the sea, as a promise of more to come. And I assure you they are no more than my agreed share. But part with them I must.'

As he opened the soft leather bag I found myself remembering that the Louisiana Creoles were notorious gamblers, and I suppose, not unnaturally, I took this to be the key to the explanation. But when I saw the object in his hand, glinting in the sun, all other thoughts fled. This was the dagger hilt that Matthew had picked up the day Raoul arrived, therefore it could not have come from the bottom of the sea. I did not dare meet his eyes, for fear he might see all the renewed doubt there.

'... the life of a wrecker captain may sound desirable,' he was saying, 'but like everything else it has its dull side. And unfortunately I have men who need to be paid if they are not to desert or decide to help themselves to my ship. God knows I cannot blame them, for they have already waited long enough for their money. And having little of my own at the moment, I look to my friend Sadgrove to tide me over. He is a king's agent and can well afford it. Only ... he requires ... a token of good faith, shall we say? And were I in his place I should also. Now—your curiosity is satisfied?'

What did it mean, I asked myself. Why did he lie? Oh, how desperately I wished I could refuse this commission. But I could find no words to tell him of my fresh fears.

For some reason—I know not what—I did not reassure him immediately, so he took my hesitation for unwillingness.

His eyes flashed fire as he said, 'So delicate all of a sudden.

You were not so when it came to stepping into another woman's shoes, were you?' And then, before I could defend myself, 'Your father did not question where *his* money came from.'

I put my hand to my mouth. 'My father—what do you mean?'

He gave me the answer with brutal simplicity. 'When your father was not carrying one kind of cargo, he carried another—slaves. Why else do you think he came to these parts? It was the only trade worth anything before the war.'

I shook my head, sick with disbelief. 'But how can you be sure of this? How would *you* know? I cannot believe it of my father. He was against all kinds of cruelty and injustice.'

'Believe it you must, for it is the truth. We served once together in the blockade running days. When your father drank, he liked to talk. Now, my Trudy, you will see Sadgrove on my behalf?'

I nodded, knowing my doubts were well founded. My heart was as heavy as stone. How many more burdens must I bear?

Yet, as at that moment Raoul pulled me into his arms and held me close to him, there was nothing more I could say except that I would do his bidding and not fail him.

It was over breakfast the following morning that Charles Lavenham announced that he too was bound for Nassau, and I was glad enough at the news, for although his company was dull enough, it did mean that I should make the passage aboard the ketch provided for him by Government House, and a marked improvement on the Constantines' haphazardly crewed craft.

Yet, when I arrived at the little wooden landing stage with Charles at my side it was with a sinking heart that I saw that it already contained Mr. Williams. The preacher was seated inside the cabin attended by one of his crew, and I was shocked by the deathly pallor of his face. When I had left him only the previous day I had assumed that a night's rest would do much to restore his strength. But now, as I noted the livid bruise above his right eye, it seemed to me that his condition had changed for the worse.

Isobel's husband regarded the sagging figure with surprised distaste, and his florid face grew a shade darker.

'Williams! How the devil did he come to be here?'

'You can blame me, if you wish, Charles.' We both turned to find Farrel had stepped aboard.

'He was doing his best to convert the riff-raff of Smithstown and got a warmer reception than he bargained for.' Farrel made his report to Charles casually enough, and I suspected with a certain degree of relish. 'I've left a couple of his men to sail his boat back, but he's in no state to be left on his own. I thought if he and one of his crew travelled with us, we might be sufficiently charitable to see him in the hands of the surgeon.'

Charles gave a grunt. 'Since you felt yourself compelled to bring him in the first place,' he observed, 'I trust you will at least have the grace to complete your work. For myself I want no part of it.'

Farrel laughed. 'No urge to befriend a man of God? Come, Charles, I'd have thought better of you.'

'You can throw him overboard for all I care,' his brother-in-law informed him frankly, 'but if come he must, I trust for all our sakes he'll suffer in silence.'

If Charles did in fact have fears of being disturbed by the Reverend Williams's sufferings they were unfounded, for although I spent much of the next three hours at his side, the sick man spoke no more than a few rambling words, although he did recover consciousness sufficiently to watch me with bloodshot, unwinking eyes.

I myself had some doubts as to Farrel's careless assurances, and indeed had reconciled myself to the fact that I was most likely the one who would have to do what was possible for the unhappy man. The rough-looking crew member paid his master little attention. But to my surprise, we had no sooner arrived at Nassau than Farrel summoned a carriage and saw the sick man and his companion settled in it with some semblance of comfort.

Nevertheless I watched the vehicle roll away with still some doubts remaining. 'You said he should have a surgeon,' I reminded Farrel, 'will . . .'

'The driver has instructions,' he interrupted me. 'I may

even check to see he has followed them. Now, is there anything else you would have me do?'

I shook my head, feeling suddenly guilty that I had doubted his good intentions. 'No', I told him, 'nothing more. And thank you.'

'It were best if the thanks were from Williams. Had it not been for your disapproving presence Charles and I would most probably have let him rot.' But his quick smile belied his words.

'I do thank you, just the same,' I responded to his smile. 'Now, will you or Charles escort me so far as Bay Street, for it is for both of you that I must shop for provisions.'

Perhaps my gaiety was the right thing, for in the end they walked on either side of me until I reached the emporium that was my first port of call, then they left me, Charles to Government House and Farrel to the sponge exchange. Surprisingly, considering the thoughts with which I was beset the mood of light-heartedness remained with me, and time passed almost unnoticed as I moved unhurriedly from shop to shop. I think I had forgotten how good it was to spend hours in a strange land doing something that was comfortingly familiar. True, many of the table items were strange to me, and certainly I had never had occasion to order provisions of any kind in such quantities before, but there was a satisfying warmth about the task that kept both mind and body occupied.

It was mid afternoon before I had finished and arranged for my orders to be delivered to the boat. I was now free to think of Raoul and the soft leather purse he had given me. I had put it for safe keeping in my reticule and its weight hung reassuringly at my wrist. It was no use remembering our last exchange of words only that this was something I must do for him. I had left its delivery until last, for Raoul had suggested that I was more likely to find Mr. Sadgrove at his private house off Lincoln Street than his office and, in view of the transaction, I could imagine the former to be more discreet. So, having consulted the slip of paper on which was written the address, I set out briskly, not unmindful that I had promised to be back at the ketch by five.

Apart from Bay Street, I knew little of Nassau, but Raoul

had drawn me a little plan with a sailor's accuracy, and I struck off down a side road indicated as a short cut. It had been cool in the store, so that the sun seemed even hotter than it had been before and I was glad to find myself in a lane so narrow that it was in shadow from the buildings on either side.

Nassau, as I had already noticed, was quiet enough in the afternoons, for from luncheon until six the majority of its inhabitants kept to their homes in preference to being abroad in the sun. Consequently I felt no surprise at the lack of life about me as I walked, and it was not until I saw the forbidding hulk of the old jail loom up ahead of me that I saw anything more alive than a drowsy dog stretched out in the warm dust. Then I thought I heard a footstep behind me, and I glanced round.

Had the man been even at arm's length I should have seen more of him, but as it was his body was so close to mine that, as I turned, his shoulder pressed roughly against my face. I gave a little cry and staggered back, and even then I had no thought other than some hurrying man had thrust himself clumsily against me. But there was some kind of bazaar stall at my back that brought me up short, and as I fought to keep my balance, I saw a knife flash.

I screamed then, or should have done, had not a calloused black hand come from somewhere and clamped itself over my mouth. Above it, I had a sudden glimpse of a face even darker than the shadow, the whites of eyes and part of a blue shirt. At such times I had imagined that one feared death or some greater assault, but I think I was conscious more of outrage than anything else. I clamped my teeth hard into the flesh of the hand that held me and felt a fierce satisfaction at the curse of pain that followed. For a moment I was free and I twisted sideways, clawing and scratching like an animal.

'Hold her!'

Ridiculously, my hat had been pushed down over my eyes, half-blinding me, and my left arm seemed stretched out and held fast by something that bit into my wrist. I kicked and felt my toe jar against bone, and would have screamed at last had not a blow in my ribs driven the breath from my body.

'Damn yuh, man, ah said hold her!'

Oh, God, I thought, there were two of them. The pain in my wrist felt agonising, and suddenly it came to me that someone was dragging at my reticule, and that its cords were wrapped about my wrist. Then, mercifully, the pulling ceased and my arm fell to my side, while a vicious cuff to my face sent me sprawling in the dust. Footsteps pattered and, miraculously, unbelievingly, whoever had assaulted me had gone.

I was panting as I got first to my knees, and then struggled to my feet. Where it had been struck, my body was a mass of pain and the left side of my face numb. Something seemed wrong with my eye, and I could feel a trickling warmth down from the corner of my mouth. I touched it gingerly with my tongue and met the salt taste of blood.

Then I lifted my arms and saw the reason for the knife. There were still the remains of leather cords about my wrist, but they had been severed through. My reticule, with all its contents, had gone.

I do not know if anyone saw me at that moment or not. Doubtless there were eyes that peered at me from behind shuttered windows, but certainly there was not a soul I could see. Half-doubled up with the pain in my side and still sobbing for breath I retraced my steps back along the way I had come.

Whether I fainted or not I have no means of knowing but certainly there is little of that short journey that I remember. All that was to remain clear was the feel of cobbles beneath my knees and my hands clasping the warm stone of a wall. And then, unbelievably, someone was gripping me beneath my arms and lifting me like a child, and Farrel's voice, urgent and concerned, speaking my name.

'They've stolen it.' I could hear another voice speaking thickly, and it was some moments before I realised that it was mine.

'Stolen? What have they stolen?' Farrel had pulled my hat from my head and was staring intently into my face, his fingers touching—strange how tenderly he was touching—my bruised cheek.

'My reticule,' I said stupidly.

'God damn and blast your reticule.' Farrel hauled me upright. 'How badly are you hurt?'

I made an effort of which a few moments before I would not have believed myself capable. 'I'm all right,' I said. 'They hit me in my side, but I shall be all right.'

I heard Farrel swear in a soft and rather frightening voice.

'Who? Did you see who it was?'

With a huge effort I tried to remember and then I knew. I knew who it was. There must have been a hundred negroes wearing blue shirts in Nassau that day, but this one had been an unusual shade that had caught my eye even as I had travelled over that morning on Charles's boat. It had belonged to the man who had come aboard with Mr. Williams—the tall, stringy member of his crew called Jethro.

But *why?* I leaned against the wall, grateful for its support, surprised that my mind could be so clear. That a penniless negro sailor should rob me was not unnatural, I supposed, but to do so in the middle of Nassau was an act of madness—unless he had known that I carried Raoul's purse as well. Yet my reticule had never left my wrist—at least but once, when I had joined Farrel and Charles on deck to see the shoal of flying fish and I had left it for a few moments in the cabin with the Reverend Williams . . .

The implications of this were too much for me and I shook my head mutely in answer to Farrel's question.

He seemed to accept my denial, for he was holding out his hand and saying in a gentler voice, 'Can you stand, Trudy?'

I nodded. 'Yes. I am not hurt too much. I should like to go home.'

'First I must get a surgeon. Then we'll find . . .'

'Farrel,' I said. Strange how strong I could make my voice sound when I tried.

He looked at me curiously. I must have been light-headed, for as he looked at me I wanted to tell him, now of all times, that I liked him and wanted to trust him, that I wished we did not quarrel so often.

'Yes?' he said.

'Please take me home. I know I'm not badly hurt, only bruised, I think. I don't wish to stay here. Get me back to Constantine Cay. Mother Moti will take care of me.'

'As you wish.'

I suppose I did faint then. I know he lifted me, for I remembered how he carried me that first time, with his hand holding me steady from the jogging of the horse, a hand surprisingly gentle for so violent a man.

I think I slept most of the way back to the island, for afterwards I could remember only an occasional moment when it seemed that I was resting against a man's shoulder and that his arm was about me, and it was not until the time came for me to walk up the sand to Gaytons that I discovered to my cost how my bruised body had stiffened so much that I cried out in pain. Once again Farrel carried me, as if I had no more weight than a child, and at last there was the blessed relief of a bed and Mother Moti's face looking down at me.

'Child, what they done to you?'

I could not answer her at once, but shook my head. Nor did I speak again for upwards of an hour, while the old black woman sat silently by my side, now and again cooling my brow and my bruised cheek with a dampened cloth. Only after I had swallowed some unpleasant draught did the pain recede a little and I was able to stand upright for a while as she undid my dress and pulled it over my head. Speaking the words with difficulty through my swollen mouth, I asked for a mirror, only to have it denied me.

'You ain't got no reason for wanting to see yourself now. Hush up an' do as I says.'

So I hushed up and obeyed her like a child, while my shift soon followed the dress and I could see the great purple bruise that now seemed to cover most of my side. Its pain frightened me, yet Mother Moti's gnarled old hands laid my body down and began gently to knead my aching flesh I was content just to let her do as she wished. When at last she stepped back I found that I could move with something approaching comfort.

'Thank you. That's wonderful.' I pulled a robe around me cautiously, and even as I did so the door opened and Lucy came in. I think my appearance must have been such that she was taken quite aback, saying, 'Oh, Trudy, what has happened. What a terrible experience to have had.'

There was a brisk formality about the words that made me doubt their sincerity, but there was little to do except answer her amiably enough.

'I think it looks worse than it is.'

At that moment Mother Moti left the room to bring fresh water and Lucy said carelessly, 'Well, you must be very brave. *I* would not like my looks spoiled like yours.' And she brought the mirror right up to my face.

It was a cruel gesture and afterwards I wished I had closed my eyes. As it was I had to bite my lip to stop myself crying out at the swollen disfigured creature who stared back at me. All I could be thankful for was that Raoul had not seen me like this.

I turned away from the sight, but Lucy's eyes continued to dwell on me—with something like pleasure, I thought. Then, as though in some way she had read my thoughts, she said, 'Raoul wants to know if you delivered his message.'

It was strange, I thought, but for the past hour I had somehow managed to put my loss from my mind. But now, like it or not, it was something that had to be faced. I would have given anything to avoid breaking the news to Raoul that the valuables with which he had entrusted me had been stolen along with my reticule, but there was no point. He would have to know sooner or later.

'Please tell him,' I said quietly, 'that I . . . I had some difficulty. I will write him a note as soon as my head has cleared a little.'

'There is no need for that,' Lucy said with relish, 'I am sure he would like to come and you can speak to him yourself.'

'No.'

I did not mean to speak with such violence, for I knew just what effect it would have on Lucy. But the word was torn from me.

I was quite right. Lucy stood up and I opened my eyes to catch the gleam of triumph in her green cat's eyes. I really and truly believe at that moment she was gloating over my discomfort.

'He will not mind,' she said softly. 'He will surely want to

offer his sympathy.' Then in a whirl of skirts she was gone from the room.

I told Mother Moti that I wanted to see no one, even while I doubted that she could keep him out. I waited, tensely, and as the minutes ticked away I began to breathe again. Perhaps I had misjudged Lucy. It was uncharitable to think there was so much malice in her.

The knock on the door came about half an hour later. I heard Mother Moti speaking strongly to him, but then there was silence and although I had turned my head away I knew he was standing beside me.

'I am sorry to hear that you have been hurt, Trudy, I understand your injuries are painful, but not serious.' The words he uttered were only platitudes. But after what he had told me—was it really only two days ago—could his sympathy really be as meaningless as Lucy's?

I knew I had to face him sooner or later. Better to know the truth now than to hide from it.

Very slowly I moved my head and so met his gaze. Then I wished I had not. The look of repugnance that passed so swiftly and unguardedly across his face was gone even as it had come. Had I been less full of doubt I might just have imagined it. But I knew I had not.

In as strong a voice as I could muster I said, 'I have lost your package, Raoul, I'm sorry.' And I told him what had happened. Even so, I was not prepared for the cold anger in his eyes as I finished my story.

'The blame must be mine alone for entrusting something so important to someone as inexperienced as yourself. You did not want to take it for me in the first place, I know that now. Next time, I will go myself.'

'But Raoul . . .' I could not deny the distaste he had made so plain at my appearance, but God knows it must have been clear enough to him that I had done my best to safeguard his property, and instinctively I sought the words with which to justify myself. But they would not come. I simply sat there as if paralysed by the expression in his dark eyes, sick with a hopeless knowledge that now I had lost my only friend.

11

LOOKING BACK, I can see now that the moment when I knew Raoul was lost to me was also the turning point in my relationship with the Constantines, when all the dark forces and the long-suppressed terrors that had been lying in wait ever since I came to Gaytons, were ready to strike. I would need all of my strength if I were not to be crushed by them.

It was only two days after my visit to Nassau that I found the joujou pinned to Reddish Constantine's door.

I did not pass this way often and I do not know what made me look there as I walked towards the stairs. But something must have caught my eye and I turned my head. For a moment my heart seemed to stop beating at the sheer and horrible familiarity of the obscene little figure that hung there.

Perhaps I should have ignored it. But, like the first one, it held a fascination that was more than I could explain. If I had wanted to turn away, I do not think I would have been capable of such a movement. I went towards the door and took the bundle of sticks antd rags into my hand, feeling as I did so the sick realisation that someone had stood in the same place perhaps only minutes earlier bent on fastening it in place. And because it was unthinkable that any of the field hands would have dared to enter Gaytons unbidden—or unnoticed—it stood to reason that the person responsible must be part of the household. *Someone, but who?*

I felt, rather than heard, the slight movement behind me

and spun round rather in the fashion of a suddenly startled cat, to find Farrel standing watching me.

'Someone has put this . . . this thing on your father's door.' With burning hand I held the joujou out to him, and it was only as I did so that I realised that he held a similar bundle.

'So I see. I have received one too. You had best give that one to me. There is only one thing to do with objects like these.' His hand was outstretched and there was a strange expression in his eyes.

I obeyed automatically, for even the touch made me feel unclean. Yet even at that moment my mind was whirling with a dreadful doubt. Had Farrel indeed just taken from his door the sign of witchcraft that he held, or had he been about to place it somewhere on his own account? It would have been easy enough for him to have left the one that I had found, and certainly he had not called to me or in any way attracted my attention while I had been studying it. Indeed, had I not sensed his presence he might well have passed me by unseen.

'Take the foul thing,' I said, and my voice was shaking. 'Take it away. Burn it.'

'So you undertsand what these are?'

I nodded without speaking. I understood well enough, and now that the idea had taken hold of me I found myself thinking that he knew far better than I. Farrel had spoken so authoritatively on *obeah*. Farrel had admitted that he had used Melindo's position in the cult for his own ends. Wasn't it possible that his knowledge went even further? That he did not just know about *obeah* as an outsider, but that he knew it *from the inside as well?*

It seemed to me as my doubts increased and my imagination roamed that Farrel Constantine had always been standing by. Never had he been far from the ugly little incidents that had almost become a part of mine and Matthew's life here at Gaytons. Farrel, the disinherited son, who must watch while his nephew took the reins that should have been his.

And yet, I had so wanted to believe that there was another Farrel. The kindly Farrel, who had also been there to comfort

me—even to hold me. The lonely, bitter Farrel, whose pride stopped him crying silently out for help and friendship.

'What's the matter?' I heard his voice coming to me as though from a long way away, and I pulled myself back to my surroundings with an effort.

'These things,' I said. 'These filthy things.'

He shrugged his shoulder, although his thin face was set in even harder lines than usual. 'It is best to pay no attention to them,' he told me. '*Obeah* is like all witchcraft—it depends on the fears of ignorant people to do its work. If it were otherwise, such religions would find more following in civilised societies. And yet,' he added, and his voice was hardly audible even in the still passage, 'such can be its strength that it can turn brother against brother, friend against friend until it seems that every man must stand alone.'

I could not look at him, for it was as though he had seen deep into my thoughts. Instead I kept my eyes on the objects he held in his hand.

'What shall you do with them?'

'Why, burn them of course.' Then he forced me to look into those inscrutable grey eyes. 'What did you do with the one *you* found, Trudy?'

How did he know that I had found one? Was there nothing secret from him? I wanted to go further into the matter, but I could not, so instead said simply, 'I threw it away.'

'Good. It is the only way.' He stuffed the two joujous in his pocket and went down the stairs. For a while I stood staring after him, confused, wondering if my doubts could be ill-founded or not. But as he disappeared from sight I knew it was impossible for me to do nothing, so on impulse I went down and knocked on Reddish Constantine's door. His gruff voice bade me enter.

During the time I had spent at Gaytons I had grown steadily less in awe of its master, for it seemed to me that there was less to fear in his blunt manner than in the apparently more friendly approaches of some of the rest of his family. I had also learned that he did not suffer fools gladly, that he held those who crawled to him in contempt. While he did not care for the views of women, I believe I had earned his

grudging respect. Today, although he greeted me civilly enough, I found myself stumbling over the words that explained my presence.

'Sit down and tell what you have to tell.' The penetrating blue eyes regarded me unwinkingly, the frail body slumped like a sack in the chair that seemed to dwarf it. And yet, I realised, in some way that I found hard to explain, there was more life in what remained of this man than I would have thought possible at our first meeting. I understood at last something of the strength that enabled him to maintain his traditional position in a family from the confines of a wheelchair, and all at once I found that it was easier for me to speak to him in a straightforward manner of the fears that haunted me. After all, if anyone wished me—or Matthew—harm it was certanly not he.

I told him of the joujou I had found by Matthew, and of the one fastened minutes earlier to his own door, as well as that held, for whatever reason, by Farrel. I even started to describe something of *obeah*, but he cut me short at this.

'I am aware of the pagan superstitions of these islands.' He folded his narrow, blue-veined hands together in his lap. 'What I wish you to tell me is what part you think my son has played in this.' He paused, watching me sharply from beneath his bushy white brows. 'It appears to be he who causes you some disquiet.'

I had mentioned nothing about my half-formed thoughts, nor had I wished to, but in some way the old man in the chair before me had discerned without difficulty what they were. His voice expressed neither dismay nor emotion of any kind. He was no more than a man seeking a fact, be it welcome or otherwise.

'You are troubled, are you not, by a suspicion that he may himself be involved in this island's witchcraft.'

'I do not know,' I said weakly. 'Such a thing would seem impossible, but something has made me uneasy. Oh, I know it is foolish to believe such superstition, but . . . there was that scorpion in Matthew's bed, and then I found the first joujou, and there was that night he could so easily have walked into

the sea and drowned. And now this thing on your door ... Oh, I know this had little to do with Farrel, but ...'

'But you cannot shut your thoughts out. I may say, young woman,' he added dryly, 'you would make an excellent target for these people, if you believe in the death wish. I can assure you that it will take more than a few superstitious negrahs to finish me off. However ... to get back to my son ... There would appear practical advantages in his interest. I myself have often wondered at his ability to get these negrahs to do a day's work.'

'*Obeah* surely only works for those who believe in it,' I protested. 'And Farrel cannot possibly ...'

Reddish Constantine said slowly, 'Child, I should not like to say what my son can find it in his heart to do.' The bonewhite face turned slowly towards me, the words laboured but precise. 'You may well have wondered about my relationship with my son, and why I have as little time for him as he doubtless has for me.'

'Yes,' I confessed, 'I have wondered.'

'He was captured at Shiloh.' A faint gesture of the joined hands. 'There was nothing dishonourable in that. Like many another Confederate officer, he was wounded and made prisoner at a time when he was unable to defend himself. He spent two years in the North before being exchanged and sent home.'

'And surely,' I said, 'that was not to his discredit.' For some obscure reason I found myself rising to Farrel's defence.

'No discredit to one who had found the experience no more than the misfortune of war. I have not asked—I do not wish to know under what circumstances Farrel gained the impression that he did.' I watched the old man's mouth move as if in sudden pain before he continued: 'Nevertheless the results were clear for all to see. He returned to the South convinced that he had fought on the wrong side. He had allowed himself to be poisoned by the company he chose to keep to a point where he was a traitor to his heritage both in word and deed.'

It was easy enough for me to see the situation objectively

for the war had been none of my doing, and I found it hard to feel strongly for either one side or the other. But it did seem difficult to believe that even the traumatic experience of being a prisoner of war could be sufficient to turn the son of a Southern plantation owner into a liberal Yankee. And certainly not one capable of committing any act that could possibly be interpreted as treachery. I spoke these thoughts aloud. I could not stop myself.

'He accepted exchange on the understanding not to take any further part in the war.' Reddish got the words out with difficulty. 'After that he was changed. For a long time I put it down to his wounds, but even when he was fully recovered it was clear to me that he was not the same man who had gone away. He worked the plantation for a while, but his heart was no longer in his work. When I came out here, I sensed that Farrel was accompaying me through a sense of duty rather than anything else. And since he has been here he has made it abundantly clear that not only has Gaytons lost my son, it has lost his son as well.'

'It is still possible that he will marry,' I said quietly.

'Marry?' Something almost like a smile twisted his thin lips. 'Child—my son has lived the life almost of a recluse since he came back from the war. He has cast off his old friends, refused invitations to every form of social gathering. I have it from his own lips that he has no intention of contracting a marriage and this I believe to be true. He hates Gaytons, and he would rather forgo founding a family at all than give me a grandson to carry on the line. For this I cannot forgive him.'

'There is his wound,' I pointed out, feeling saddened to learn how deep and bitter went the conflict between these two men. 'It is possible that he feels a sensitivity that will pass with time.'

Reddish Constantine made a movement of irritation. 'Half the country was peopled with maimed men, when last I saw it. Do you mean to tell me that none of them are to find wives?'

Of course he was right. I was silent for a moment before I

reminded him: 'But whether he marries or not, you have Matthew.'

'Yes. He appears a good enough lad, and he is a comfort to me. But nevertheless it will be ten years before he is in a position to take the plantation over in his own right. I have decided I cannot allow him to be under the sole influence of my son, during all that time.'

I frowned, wanting to tell him he had no choice, but before I could speak he went on: 'It is for that reason that I should tell you I have come to a business arrangement with Captain Fernac.'

I stared at him. 'With Raoul?'

'It is so surprising? The man is a gentleman, for all his debatable way of earning a living. And I must confess I enjoy his company.'

'And the business arrangement?'

I thought the pale blue eyes narrowed slightly, as if in consideration. Then: 'Since you are Matthew's sister, and in some measure have the responsibility of a mother, it is perhaps right that I confide in you.

'My association with Captain Fernac is twofold. I have information to the effect that there is a valuable cargo sunk off the coast of this island. Fernac has the necessary skill and equipment to bring it to the surface, and is in fact doing so presently. He will take a half share of whatever the profits may be.' Perhaps he intercepted a look of surprise on my face, for he went on, 'You are not a fool. It must be clear to you that this plantation is not as profitable as it should be. My expenses are high without any corresponding income. In a word, I need the money.'

I waited for him to tell me the second reason.

'I have explained my relations with my son. Until Matthew grows of an age, it is clear that someone must act as his adviser.' Old Reddish paused, as though for breath. His voice was noticeably weaker as he continued. 'Even kings must have regents when they are young. And I must acknowledge the fact that Farrell cares nothing for Gaytons and Charles Lavenham is a fool. Fernac is not a planter either, but he comes from the South and he will learn quickly enough.'

Yes, I thought, Raoul would learn. If there was money at stake I felt fairly sure that he would learn very quickly. And yet . . .

'You have reservations?'

I had indeed, but I could not put my deep disquiet into words. I had recently come to see the darker side of Raoul's nature, and I liked not what I saw.

Even kings have regents.

Yes, I thought, and some monarchs had been ill served by them.

'I . . .'

But he seemed not to want an answer to his question, but went on carelessly, 'There is another point. I have little time for my granddaughter, Lucy, but I am aware that she needs a husband. Raoul Fernac could tame her well. And she is at least decorative.'

He must have heard the sharp intake of my breath, for he looked sharply at me. I liked his 'business arrangement' less and less; not only for the discomfort it could cause me, but because of Matthew.

'Well, miss, you have said nothing, but my mind is made up. It will be up to you to make the matter clear to the boy.' His eyes closed and he sank even lower into his chair. I knew I was dismissed.

It was a subject I could well have broached during his lessons that morning, but through indecision on my part I put the matter aside. Something was wrong, but I could not put my finger to it.

A few days ago there might have been some pleasure in the thought of Raoul making his permanent home here, but now . . . now I was not so sure. And with Lucy as his wife would they really put Matthew's interests first, particularly when they had children of their own. Up till now neither had shown any deep interest in Matthew, whereas Farrel . . . Now my thoughts were in utter confusion. Only a little while ago I suspected Farrel of God knows what evil, yet he and the boy had become such splendid companions. He was a patient and careful teacher and Matthew an eager and admiring listener. Surely that could not all be a façade? Yet of one thing

I was certain. If Raoul and Lucy were to occupy the two 'thrones' of Constantine Cay after the old man's death, then there would be nothing to keep Farrel here. Strangely I found it hard to imagine Gaytons without him.

With Matthew in front of me I tried to concentrate on our lessons, but the very room seemed to oppress me. There was a more than usual airlessness that made what was usually a rewarding time tedious for both of us. Matthew's attention wandered continually, and I could not find it in myself to blame him.

'It's so quiet today,' he observed suddenly. 'Have you noticed, Trudy? You can hear the sea.'

I walked to the screened window and stood there for a moment, hoping for a breath of air as much as anything else. But it was true, what Matthew had said. Usually there was a general hum of sound within the house, a clatter from the kitchens, the indoor hands chatting to each other on the rear stoop, that merged into a general and unidentifiable background noise. Now there was nothing. Only the sound of the insects humming against the screens, and the dull, distant boom of the surf.

'It is very hot,' I said. 'I expect most of the hands are asleep.'

In truth, I imagined no such thing. There was an oppression, even an eeriness about the silence that I found deeply disturbing, but for the life of me I could not suggest why. I knew only that a sense of foreboding was stronger in me than it had been at any time since I landed on the island.

'What are you thinking about, Trudy?'

I had been staring at nothing for quite some time, and Matthew's question was a natural enough one to make. Even so, it caught me sufficiently off guard to make an instinctive reply.

'I was thinking how nice it would be to go home.' Once the words were out I realised what I was saying, and indeed how deeply they were felt. For the first time I found myself facing my circumstances squarely, and it was by no means pleasant to realise at that moment with what longings I thought of the clean, honest English countryside and the joy of having

familiar faces about me. I knew suddenly that I was tired of being friendless and alone, just as I longed to be free of whatever it was that seemed to be in the very air we breathed.

Matthew looked at me in surprise, as well he might. 'Home?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'would you like to see England again?'

He was silent for a moment, summing up the situation in that strangely adult manner he sometimes adopted. 'Yes,' he said slowly. 'But not yet. I'm not afraid of Grandfather any longer, and Uncle Farrel teaches me lots of things. I don't care so much for the others, but as long as you and Uncle Farrel are here then it's all right. Besides, one day I'm going to own Gaytons, and Constantine Cay, aren't I? Grandfather says it's a great responsibility and that I have a duty to everyone here. So even if I am sometimes just a *little* afraid, I cannot really go, can I?' he said again, as if he wanted to make quite certain what he meant. 'It would be quite different if you and he were not here.'

I turned back to the window, full of unease again. With an effort I forced myself to some semblance of calm. After all, I told myself the child's declaration was perfectly natural, yet his dependence on me, on Farrel, could prove a fragile thing indeed. And what, I thought, in sudden despair, did the future hold for me?

I forced myself to smile brightly. 'Of course you want to stay here. I was just being homesick and silly. I think it must be the heat today.'

'Yes,' he answered, as if comfortitng me, 'it is very hot today.' Then he went on, his eyes full of suppressed excitement, 'But there are the drums . . . Listen to them, Trudy. Oh, I like the drums.'

In the quietness of my own room that afternoon I found myself listening to the faint, muffled beating that seemed to mingle inextricably with the sea. To me it was a sinister sound, signalling some nameless horror. But then I felt out of patience at the thought. Matthew had no such apprehensions, therefore it was probably foolish in the extreme to worry on that account. Boys, after all, were well known to enjoy mys-

tery and such excitements as the wilder parts of the world could provide. To make more account of the matter than that was like conjuring goblins and bogies from the fire.

I had not intended to sleep that afternoon, but the stifling heat overwhelmed me like a drug. When I awoke the sun was dipping low over the trees and there was the first hint of cool in the draught of air that sighed in through the window.

Perhaps it was the slight remission of heat that raised my spirits, and I changed my dress with a lighter heart. Matthew was not in his room when I called on him, but downstairs one of the stable boys was able to give me a reason readily enough.

'Young master done gone ridin' with Capt' Farrel, ma'am.'

I frowned. 'How long ago?'

'Maybe fifteen minutes.'

'Did they say when they would return?'

The whites of his eyes rolled at me. 'Didn't say nothing, ma'am.' The boy kicked sullenly at the white sanded path. 'Reckon they'll be back soon though. Ain't likely to stay out late tonight.'

'Why not?'

'Dunno. Ain't no reason, I guess.'

Only there was a reason of course. I had been on Constantine Cay long enough to know that. I took hold of the stable boy's narrow shoulders and shook him. 'Now listen,' I told him tensely. 'Why aren't they likely to stay out? What is happening tonight? Answer me, or I'll box your ears.'

Fear must have added some special quality to my voice, for the boy gave me a startled look and muttered something I could not catch. I shook him again, and this time the words were clearer even if their meaning was not.

'Erzulie got out on boat.'

'Who's Erzulie? And what boat?'

Perhaps he would have told me, but before I had the chance to question him again he had twisted from my grasp and run back to the stables. I stood there for a moment in the quick gathering dusk, searching my memory for that half-remembered word. *Erzulie*. I knew no one of that name,

and yet I could have sworn to hearing it only days before. A few days . . .

Suddenly I was in Melindo's house again, staring at the carved wooden ship hanging by cords from the ceiling, while Farrel's voice spoke unemotionally behind me.

Erzulie's boat. The craft of the *obeah* goddess. The central point of some dark festival, where blood would be spilt for God alone knew what cause.

'Matthew!' I said aloud. I do not know if I called him in that moment or simply spoke his name in some vain effort to keep his presence alive for me. But I do know that I felt myself in the grip of such terror as I had never known before. All my fears and doubts about Farrel came flooding back to me. Why, I asked myself, on this night of all nights had he chosen to ride off with Matthew alone? What possible emergency about the plantation could have necessitated the presence of a child, long after the working day of the field hands was over?

I stood with my hands clenched as I did my best to keep control of my shaking body and to drive from my mind the picture that I feared most—the picture of Farrel as I had seen him that morning, with the joujou in his hand. Suppose after all my suspicions had been well founded. Suppose Farrel was a secret follower of the island's foul cult? *What would he be needing Matthew for . . .*

I think it must have been during that seemingly endless moment of doubt and sick dread that I ceased to be entirely accountable for my actions, for I have only a hazy memory of much that happened next. I know that I sought out Charles to entreat his help, for his red silly face is clear enough in my mind, just as is the sound of his braying laugh as he scoffed at my needless alarm. I was making much of nothing. The heat was making me light-headed. It was all in my imagination, and similar idiocies. God knows with what words I rewarded his stumbling excuses, for I can recall the shocked look he gave me, just as I can remember Isobel suggesting I should lie down and calm myself. I called her by some name that must have surprised both of us, and wept. Indeed, I may have shouted at her at the top of my voice for

all I know. Only then, mercifully, did I find myself in another part of the house, with Raoul holding me so hard by my shoulders that I could have cried out with pain.

'Control yourself.' His voice was like the crack of a whip.

I called out wildly that he must help me, and the next moment felt a stinging pain on my cheek where his open hand had struck me.

'So. We will speak sensibly. What is the matter?'

I drew a shuddering breath, at least his blow had calmed me, cleared my head.

'It's Matthew,' I told him. 'Farrel has taken him.'

'Taken him where, for God's sake? No, wait.' He let go of me and for the first time I made the discovery that we were standing in the library. A moment later a glass was pressed into my hand, and I drank its contents dutifully, choking a little at the fiery Jamaican rum.

'I don't know where he has taken him,' I said. 'I don't even know that he means the boy any harm. I only *feel* that Matthew is in some kind of danger. Tonight ...' Perhaps rambling a little, I put my fears into words, ending with the frightening admission of the stable boy.

'I understand so little of what may be happening,' I concluded. 'Perhaps I *am* worrying about nothing. But ... but there's this boat ...'

'Erzulie is mistress of the water,' Raoul said slowly. 'Me, I am more familiar with the gods of Haiti, but *voodoo* there and *obeah* here I imagine are much the same. Erzulie I do not fully understand, and I doubt if many white men do. I think she is a mixture of many things. Of good in some ways, evil in others, her boat is called Agwe, and she uses it to cross the sea to a place they call the city of Camps, which is a journey all worshippers must make once at least. When one reaches it there are sacrifices over the water before Erzulie provides whatever knowledge is necessary for the return journey.'

'It doesn't sound so terrible after all,' I said. But if that were true, I thought inwardly, why then could I not shake off this terrible premonition of danger?

'There are sacrifices as I said,' he went on. 'Chickens and

goats usually, but not always. Also, there is a night-long ceremony before the journey commences.'

'Do you know where Matthew might have been taken?'

Raoul shrugged his shoulders. 'One must be reasonable, Trudy. You do not know that anyone has taken the boy anywhere. If Farrel has taken him, then it is undoubtedly something concerned with the estate—all experience for the Young Master.' I sensed a note of sarcasm as he said that. Then he added, 'But if he has been taken, then perhaps he will not be released with any readiness.'

I knew then I had to find Matthew. 'Raoul,' I said, 'I'm going after him. Are you going to help me or not?'

He leaned back against the edge of the door and stared at me reflectively, just as he had looked at me under the dusky magnolia tree and I was lost. Oh yes, I had trembled under the regard of those dark eyes that seemed to caress anyone on whom they rested, but instinctively I had known then he was a man in whom I could never put my whole trust.

I think in this moment I hated him, but I needed him too. Raoul Fernac was not a man to be moved by pleading. He would help me either for some reason of his own, or in exchange for a price. And because there was no one else to whom I could turn, there was no alternative but to wait and find which it was to be.

'I have a personal interest in your brother.' He smiled with faint irony. 'Your *brother*.'

I said desperately, 'I don't care what you call him. And I know about the agreement with Colonel Constantine.'

He raised his dark eyebrows in surprise. 'That I had not known. But since he has confided in you, we may save time. I have no great desire to act as a kind of nursemaid for the next ten years. Forgive me, but while I wish the boy no harm, you must admit that if he fails to make a reappearance, it could only be to my advantage.'

I felt sick, violently sick. To think that I had allowed this man to hold me in his arms, to kiss me. My sickness turned to cold, icy anger.

'You have made your position clear,' I said. 'But I am answerable not to you, but to Colonel Constantine. When he

hears a little more about the man who is to be in charge of his grandson . . .'

I turned to go, but a hand was clamped on to my arm. His eyes were very close to mine, dark and glittering, quite without heart or hope.

'Go to the Colonel by all means.' His voice was soft with menace. 'But remember who you really are. I do not think he will like to learn how he has been deceived all these weeks. Will he consider *you* a suitable person to be in charge of his precious grandson? I think not. The Colonel is known to be a hard man who does not like strangers—particularly those who cheat him. I fear you would be on the next boat to Nassau!'

Of course he was right, and I was trapped into silence. His hand dropped from my arm, touching it with a snake-like movement, and for a moment we were face to face, all pretence gone. Then I turned and ran from the library and out into the hot dusk outside.

There must have been a horse ready saddled in the stables, although I have no memory of demanding one. All I do remember is the muffled beat of the animal's hooves on the sand and the movement of the beast beneath me as I rode out of Gaytons and headed blindly in some direction that the horse must have known better than I.

Whether this was truly so or not I have no means of telling. Beyond question I was in no ordinary state of mind during that wild ride, and for all my conscious actions I might well have headed anywhere. Yet there was a reality about the trees against a sky that was darker than usual, and the deep pools of shadow closer to the ground.

When the horse nearly stumbled and I had to slow him down I was aware of a stillness that seemed to spring from the coming night. Even the drums had stopped. And above all there was a sense of something I had never known before. At any other time I should have glanced now and then over my shoulder, had I gone on at all, for always there was a feeling that someone or something rode with me. It was a knowledge that at any other time would have left me weak

and helpless with dread and fear, but which on this occasion did no more than urge me on.

When the drums started again, louder now, and more insistent, as if they were summoning me to their very presence, I whipped up the horse again until I saw the flickering lights of a group of huts beyond the trees.

It was the same small community that I had visited the first day I had arrived at Constantine Cay, though, save for the big square bulk of the cotton gin, one simple hut meant no more to me than another. Yet as I reined in my horse I realised that whereas the majority of the buildings were dark, one was brightly lit.

What made me go in? I have no more idea now than I did then. I only know I was drawn to the village *humfo* as if by some invisible force and no power on earth could have stopped me.

I was standing at the door of the crowded room, and the black blank faces were staring at me, while in the background the drums throbbed and there was a kind of confused murmuring that rose and fell like the sound of a small and distant sea.

It is strange that although the only light in that place consisted of a few small oil lamps I could see everything very clearly, and stranger still that I knew quite well what it was I saw. Some of my knowledge must have been accountable to the fact that I had picked up small fragments of *obeah* ritual from Raoul or Farrel, and it may well have been that there was much else I had overheard in the kitchens of Gaytons. Half heard, half understood fragments that had meant nothing at the time, but had remained in my mind without conscious effort. Yet there were many things I saw that evening that had a familiarity that was beyond explanation.

It must have been the biggest building in the settlement, high-roofed, with the gaudy *veve* drawings crawling up the walls beyond the altar, with its haphazard collection of crude pottery and cheap prints. I took in the line of expensive-looking jars that stood before the *pe*, knowing and yet not knowing by what means I knew that they contained the souls of

those who were to make their journey to the City of the Camps.

After that first, incurious glance, nobody appeared to take any further interest in me. They had all turned towards the model of a boat that hung from the shadowed rafters, and the chanting voices took up a name and repeated it, over and over again.

'Agwe Rolo . . . Agwe Rolo . . .'

The heat in that place was like the inside of a furnace and my body was running with perspiration, yet I felt no discomfort. The stench of bodies, the fetid air and the scent of musk were all about me, yet I felt no distaste. I started to sway with the crowd in time with that dreadful chant.

There was a white child not very far from me, with Mother Moti's form beside him. On his face was a fixed, intent look, just like that time he had walked with slow purpose into the sea. I accepted without surprise it was Matthew and that he too rocked his body in time with the crowd about him.

'Agwe Rolo . . . Agwe Rolo . . .'

How did I know while Agwe was the name of Erzulie's boat, Agwe Rolo was the goddess's husband? And why had I come here in any case? Something, a long way at the very back of my mind told me that it was something to do with Matthew. But Matthew was there in front of me, and I felt no compulsion to do anything about it.

The beat of the drums changed, gathering in sound and tempo. The chanting grew louder, so that the plaintive, mournful wail filled the whole room. Now the black bodies were moving faster and faster so that it seemed the place had come alive, building to a huge crescendo. In only one corner of the room was there little change, and that was where Mother Moti and Matthew stood.

Even as I watched the old woman's hands were on the boy's shoulders, guiding him forward step by step to where a space had been left in the centre of all these moving chanting bodies.

It was then that some part of me knew that I must reach Matthew, snatch him up—do anything to get him away from

this place where we stood and find shelter in the clean air of the night. Yet knowing that, I still could not move.

I stood rooted to the ground, and as I watched what was happening in front of me, some other previously unknown part of my mind told me that I should not worry. That I should be glad for Matthew. That he was about to become part of something rich and powerful beyond imagination. The drums welled up and I felt my body begin to move with their insistent rhythm, while my mind blurred to a delicious, almost sensual dream . . .

A hand fell on my shoulder, calling me back . . .

'Trudy—for God's sake, what are you doing here?'

Farrel—for it was he—was looking as angry as he had ever done, but if I felt anything at all at that moment it was a kind of sorrow that he should have interrupted something terribly important. I mumbled something, but it was difficult to form the words.

'Look at me!'

I wanted to tell him to leave me alone, but he jerked me around and shook me.

'Get over there by the horses and wait while I bring the boy.'

Still in my dreamlike state I obeyed him. Behind me there was a low murmur of rage, but I seemed unable to associate it with any kind of danger. It meant nothing to me that there was a pistol in Farrel's hand when he left me to force his way through that mob, nor that the low hiss turned to shouting and that there was the sound of a shot.

The pain in my head echoed the throb of those drums, but at least I was starting to feel. There were tingling sensations in my legs and arms, as if I had been suffering from some kind of paralysis.

Then, hands I had come to recognise were lifting me on to the horse and I was riding beyond the settlement, with Farrel at my side.

'Matthew,' I cried, as memory returned.

'I have him.' Then I saw the small figure huddled on the saddle in front of him, and the brief, brilliant smile on Farrel's face as he turned to reassure me, and knew that we were safe.

12

When I came down to dinner that evening I had the curious feeling of one who was returning from a dream. That I had ridden back with Matthew from a nightmare I could remember, but all details of the journey seemed in some strange way to have been erased from my mind. Not until we had reached the stables and I was dismounting did I suddenly become aware of my surroundings, and then the shock was such that I cried out and ran to Matthew, who was staring about him as though he too had been experiencing something of the same. He came straight to my arms and I held him tightly for a moment as if we were offering silent comfort to each other.

'We had best get him to bed,' Farrel said.

I nodded dumbly, not yet trusting myself to speak. In truth, I had not yet adjusted my mind to the fact that, far from being the cause of Matthew's disappearance, it was Farrel who had saved the two of us. The shame of my doubt and distrust lay within me like a stone, yet even as we put the still bewildered boy to bed where almost immediately he fell asleep, I could not find the words to relieve this heavy burden.

When the boy's breathing was steady and the strain had left his face I followed Farrel down to the deserted porch.

'There's a storm coming,' I said, still unable to put into words some of the score of things that were passing through my mind. But the commonplace remark was true enough. There was something almost unnerving about the brooding

silence that hung over the island at that moment. What little wind there was had dropped, and the palm trees stood motionless, like sentinels, all about us. I had grown almost used to the heat, but now it seemed as though the world had become an oven and my dress clung to my damp body so that even to move was an acute discomfort. Every breath I drew seemed like drawing in air from a furnace. The stars had come out and shone from directly overhead with their customary brilliance, but beyond the trees there was an unnatural blackness that could only be cloud.

'I think not. One does get nights such as this sometimes. We shall see no bad weather for a good month yet.' Farrel stared out into the thick darkness with a distracted air. Then he said abruptly, 'You saw that old witch, Mother Moti, down there?'

'Yes.'

'The joujous must have been her doing.' He was silent for a moment before going on: 'The boy would have trusted her. It could not have been so difficult to persuade him to go to that foul place in her company.'

'I thought it was you.' The words I had been wanting to speak came out at last.

Farrel turned and looked at me. There was an expression on the face of this difficult, remote man that I could not place. I only knew that I could not hold back any of the truth of the darkest of my thoughts.

'For God's sake, Trudy? What—or who—could have driven you to think that?'

It seemed as though this were the very first time I had heard him use my given name, and for some reason, I found it a moving gesture. As we stood face to face in the shadows his scar was hidden and that moment I saw his face as it must have been once—strong and not unhandsome—the face of a proud man.

'I don't know,' I said at last, in a low voice. 'You seemed to know so much about these people . . . and when I heard you and Matthew had ridden off together . . .' I stumbled, unable to go on.

'You were not to blame. I learned you had gone and

guessed at what might be happening. What I had not counted on was that they . . .' It was his turn to break off, as though reluctant to put happenings into words. 'You know that you were . . . not yourself?'

I had known it well enough, since the moment when I had woken up to my surroundings only a short time before. I had also known that some power outside myself had drawn me to that place, just as it had cloaked all that had been happening with an awful familiarity.

'God knows how it is done. There is so much here that people like us can never understand,' Farrel said quietly. 'Had you stayed, I imagine you would have been served the same way as the boy.'

'And . . . what would that have been? I can only think of the evil nature of that place.'

'I thought you knew. It was an initiation ceremony.'

Initiation! Walking down the flawless sweep of the stairs little more than an hour later, I found myself shivering involuntarily despite the oppressive heat. It was true what Farrel had said, I thought. There was so much in these strange, remote places that we could not understand. Perhaps the new world should never try to mix with the old. We were not wanted here. We either stayed and became a part of them, or we left for good.

Gathering as usual in the small, panelled chamber off the dining room, I could sense at once the tension in the air. It was clear that all were aware of what had passed and equally apparent that there was a general reluctance to speak of it. I thought, not without bitterness, that this was understandable so far as Charles and Raoul were concerned. I had sought their help and been refused, and I was conscious of a contempt towards them that I found difficult to conceal. Charles's attitude had not been entirely unexpected, for I had long considered him a poor kind of buffoon, curiously out of his depth in his adopted family. It was Raoul towards whom the weight of my anger was directed. When I thought of his last, cruelly indifferent words over Matthew, it was almost more than I could bear.

I glanced about the room, only to discover that he was not

present. This was a surprise, for I had not expected him to baulk at facing me, only to deny the meaning behind those words. Lucy was there, chattering to her mother, with what seemed a kind of false gaiety, and as she looked towards me I detected in her eyes a now familiar look of triumph.

'I hear Matthew has been straying once again. You should take better care of him.' Her clear voice broke the silence that had fallen on my entry, and I had to admit to a twinge of admiration that she should be the one to take up the unspoken challenge.

'Indeed I shall in future,' I said, and managed to smile. Perhaps, I thought, that was all that was known, after all. That Matthew had disappeared briefly, and that I had succeeded in finding him and bringing him back. I glanced about me and saw in the eyes of Charles and Isobel no more than scorn at my apparent foolishness.

'So—I hear that Matthew has returned.'

I turned abruptly to discover that Raoul had followed me into the room, silent as a cat, and was standing there, almost as if to bar my way. He was as immaculate as ever in a suit of black, the white silk shirt in almost startling contrast to his saturnine face. I should have felt anger at the sight of him, but instead I felt a small quiver of fear. Not for myself—indeed I should have been glad to see the back of Constantine Cay and all who lived there—but Matthew was some kind of hostage, and with such a lever I had no means of knowing what this bland, rather frightening man from Louisiana might force me to do.

'Yes,' I said as lightly as I could. 'He is safe enough—now.' And then, to my infinite relief the door opened again and Ham wheeled Reddish's chair into the room. His appearance was by custom the signal for a general move into dinner.

'There is a wind rising.' Reddish Constantine rarely made conversation for its own sake, and I was surprised when he broke the customary silence, while the house boy served a course of peppered clam meat.

Isobel fanned herself. 'I declare it will be a relief. All today there has hardly been sufficient air to breathe.'

For once I found it comparatively easy to feel sympathy for Charles's wife, for if anything the room was more stifling than the porch had been and her rather florid face was glistening in the candlelight. But her father ignored her, and I realised with sudden understanding that the old man's eyes were on Raoul.

'What do you think, Fernac? *Are* we in for a storm?'

'I think not.' It was clear from the readiness with which he made his reply that Raoul had already considered the matter, and I was not surprised when his answer was much the same as Farrel had given me. 'The real storms rarely come out of season in these parts. In—two months' time it would be prudent to expect a hurricane. But not now.'

I knew nothing of hurricanes save what I had read in books, yet I could not rid myself of the strangeness of the dusk I had just witnessed. 'None of us are natives of these islands,' I pointed out. 'Surely it is possible for the weather to break early?'

'Ah,' returned Raoul, 'our Miss Marchmont has been reading more books.' I think I was the only one who realised there was no humour in his voice. But as my colour rose and I looked across the table, I saw that I was wrong. Farrel had noticed, too, and he gave me the smallest of smiles of sympathy. I was oddly warmed by it.

'But she is right,' Raoul went on, 'that is why I made enquiries when I found the glass was falling. The local people say that a veritable hurricane is never early. But there is a condition—I have forgotten the word they use for it—which has all the appearances of a great storm and yet which comes to nothing. On such occasions I think we may trust the islanders to know their own weather.'

'Possibly.' Farrel looked towards the tall windows, then he broke off. 'What the devil's that?'

I too had heard a sound that certainly was not wind. It was undoubtedly that of a voice raised in anger—the higher, clearer tones of a Welshman against the deeper protestations of one of the negroes, presumably Ham, who was evidently trying to calm some intruder.

'If I am not mistaken,' Charles observed, 'we are about to

be visited by our reverend and regrettably drunk friend Williams . . .'

The words were barely out of his mouth before the door burst open and Mr. Williams stood there, wild-eyed and bare-headed, while Ham hovered uncertainly in the background. Absurdly, I found myself wondering if black servants were permitted to throw out unwelcome guests who happened to be white, and was doubly intrigued by the swiftness of old Reddish's gesture that dismissed Ham.

Aloud, he said, 'You take a damn liberty, sir.'

'I take no liberty with such as you, Reddish Constantine.' I had taken it for granted that the Reverend Williams would be the worse for drink, and it was with a sudden shock that I realised that the wildness of his appearance was due not to liquor, but the intensity of anger. The man was beside himself with rage, and yet doing all in his power to control it. He walked forward unsteadily, and I found myself thinking, not for the first time, that his appearance was not unlike that of an Old Testament prophet calling on his God for vengeance.

'You had best explain yourself, sir,' the Colonel replied evenly. 'And since you insist on intruding, sit down to do it.'

'No Vanborough has ever sat with a traitor.' The wild figure paused, then withdrawing his hand from his pocket, threw something onto the polished table that landed with a metallic thud, to glow warmly in the candlelight. Then, with a mounting hysteria in his voice, he intoned: 'God's curse on you, Constantine! What have you to say to that?'

All of us leaned slightly forward to see better the object that lay there. In the sudden silence that had fallen, I could not help but think what an important part in my life this golden dagger hilt had played. Raoul's indrawn breath, the sudden hiss as he let it out, told me he recognised it as one of the valuables that had been stolen with my reticule in Nassau, the thing about which he lied when he said he had brought it up from the *Santa Anna*—or any ship off Constantine Cay. Now was the time to tell Colonel Constantine.

While I hesitated Reddish Constantine did not move or look up. 'It is a pretty enough trinket,' he said quietly.

'And where did it come from?'

If it was bewilderment I saw first of all in the old man's pale eyes it was driven out an instant later by some other and stronger emotion, though he said nothing. The silence that followed was broken by Raoul.

'You *know*, I think, where it came from. The bottom of the sea.'

Then, as if he had not heard, Reddish went on: 'You spoke of the Vanboroughs.'

'I did. An old English family, settled two generations in Alabama. If you care to study that dagger, sir, you will see it carries our crest.'

'*Your* crest?'

'As a not very distinguished scion of that house, I thought it best to change my name. You will appreciate that a revelation of God combined with a notable weakness of the flesh make poor bedfellows.' The preacher's eyes were as wild as ever, but he spoke now as a man in full control of himself.

Very softly, but with a ring of steel in his voice, Reddish Constantine said, 'You will leave us. *Now*.'

Mr. Williams ignored him. Instead, he launched into a flow from which there was no stopping him.

'It was at the time when Sherman turned to make for the sea that most of us knew that the Confederacy was lost. You remember? Some of its supporters believed that the South could and would rise again. But to do that they would need arms, and the money to buy them. There were few illusions that the Yankees would leave us with as much as a loaf of bread, so we gathered what we could. Gold mostly, and the jewellery of our womenfolk. And we gave it to one man, in order that he should keep it against our army's need. We gave it, God help us, to a treacherous dog called Reddish Constantine, who made away with it for his own ends!'

In a strange, thick voice, Reddish said, 'You don't understand . . .'

'*Then make your explanations to your Maker!*'

I thought it was I who first saw the pistol in the preacher's hand, but if this was so, Farrel's reactions were the quicker. He was on his feet and moving forward to shield his father

before I realised that he had so much as stirred, and the sound of his chair spinning to the ground merged with the crash of the shot.

'No . . .'

I heard my voice crying out the word, and then Farrel was falling forward on to the table and I saw the vivid red of blood against the white linen. I was on my feet, reaching for him at the same moment that I became aware that Reddish Constantitne, his face working, was rising slowly to his feet.

'Father!' I heard Isobel cry. 'Please . . .'

But at that moment I do not think he was capable of hearing anything. His eyes, as he rose, were staring into mine, and I saw them fix and glaze as the life went out of them. He made a small, strangled cry, then fell back slackly in the chair to which he had been confined so long.

'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay!'

The maniacal cry of triumph from the preacher made my blood run suddenly cold. He was staring at the dead figure in the chair with a look of terrible glee, and I knew in that moment that his reason had gone. Then, without warning, he turned and blundered through the door, and I could hear his shambling footsteps fading across the hall beyond. One of us should have stopped him, but I think we were mesmerised by what had happened.

Behind me, Isobel began to cry with great noisy sobs, but I paid her scant attention, for Farrel was slumped across the table before me, his face chalky white. Was he dead too? An icy hand seemed to grip my inside in terrible fear. Then, as though my terror had communicated itself to him he moaned a little, as if in sleep.

'Farrel . . .' I reached out my hand towards him.

He stirred, then suddenly opened his eyes, staring fixedly past me.

'Damn preacher. Should have shot him long ago.' All at once the grey eyes focussed and became alive again. He said thickly, like a drunken man, 'Help me to my feet, cousin.'

I could see the spreading patch of crimson on the white linen of his shirt and the tell-tale dark smudge high up on the right breast of his jacket where the bullet must have entered.

Clearly it had missed his heart. Pray God it was not too serious. I pulled myself together, sensing it was I who must be the practical one, and looking round, said briefly, 'Someone please help me.'

Raoul had been at my side, unheard, and he leaned forward and gripped one of Farrel's arms. After a minute's hesitation Charles made shift with the other. I saw Farrel clench his teeth as, together, they raised him to a kind of awkward sitting position, and from thence to his feet. For a moment I thought they were actually holding him upright by main force, but with what was obviously a supreme effort of will, Farrel moved his legs uncertainly.

'It is little to worry about,' Raoul observed. 'A flesh wound, that is all.'

I flashed him a look and did not attempt to hide the repugnance I felt for his callousness. The blood was still spreading across the white shirt at a frightening rate and Farrel's breath was coming with a harsh, rasping sound that filled me with further apprehension.

'Help him to his bed,' I ordered, wishing fervently that there was a physician nearer than Nassau. He might as well have been at the other end of the globe for all the help he could give at this moment.

'I can walk,' Farrel muttered grimly, sensing Raoul's indifference to his plight. And indeed he made some show of doing so, as with a man on either side of him he lurched with dragging feet from the room and to the stairs.

By the time I joined them a few minutes later he was lying, bootless, on his bed, and together we made shift to remove his jacket. I could only be glad when he fainted before the task was completed. I must confess that my own senses swam for a moment at the sight of the blood-soaked garment beneath. I had brought a basin of warm water and some clean towels with me, but as I stood there staring down at the unconscious figure, my wit almost deserted me. Cuts and bruises I had tended a plenty, but this . . . this was something quite beyond my experience.

'The bullet has passed through, so far as I can judge,'

Charles told me after peering down at Farrel. 'If he does not lose too much blood . . .'

I swallowed. 'I'll do what I can.'

'Do you need help?' A short time before I should have been astonished that the offer came from Charles Lavenham instead of Raoul. But no longer. I had noted, also without surprise, that neither of the other two women in the house had come forward so I must manage as best I could.

'No,' I said to Charles, guessing that although his offer was genuine enough his clumsy movements would be of little use. 'No, you will be needed downstairs. I'll call you should I need you.'

As soon as I was alone I found new strength and confidence and set to work, filled with a sense of urgency to do what little I could do before Farrel regained consciousness. I tore away the sodden shirt and cleaned the wounds. That which marked the entry of the bullet seemed small enough—a neat hole that bled freely, but which was not in itself too frightening. It was the wound caused by the missile's exit that made me sick and faint—a great ragged cavity from which blood welled at frightening speed.

I folded a shredded towel and made a pad with which to stem the worst of the bleeding, then set about keeping it in place with longer strips of linen. It seemed to take so long, and by the time my task was completed to the best of my ability, I was exhausted, and seemingly as covered in my patient's blood as if I had been wounded myself. But at least he seemed to have stopped bleeding.

Only when I had cleaned myself up did I really look at the still figure on the bed. All the colour had drained from his skin, giving his face a curiously defenceless look. His breathing was still uneven and every now and then he stirred restlessly. When I laid a hand on his brow I found it burning with fever.

Almost unconsciously I touched his scarred cheek with the tips of my fingers. Something like that was really of so little importance. I wondered how I could ever have been repulsed by it. Perhaps, when he was well enough, I could find the words to tell him. I still had not apologised for my doubts of

him that day. Only now did it occur to me that at every time I had been in trouble since I came to Constantine Cay, Farrel had always been at hand to help me. He had brought me from Smithstown that first day. He had found me in Nassau after I had been attacked. He had even been there to pull me from a leaking boat. And finally, today, he had saved me from a fate I did not dare to think about. He had asked no thanks and I had hardly given any. I felt ashamed.

'Trudy . . .'

'Yes. Yes. I'm here.' I answered swiftly enough, but he seemed to have spoken my name more in the delirium of his fever than through any conscious act of will. His hand moved on top of the coverlet as though he were seeking some assurance of a presence nearby. I put mine in it and his grip tightened as though by holding on to me he was holding on to life.

He began to speak again, but this time the words were so indistinct that I could make little sense of them. Here and there I recognised names of places that I knew to have been the scene of battles in the late war, but in the main it made up no more than a confused gabble of sound. I could imagine Farrel's sick mind ranging back over the turbulent years that had led him to this stifling room in a land far from his old home.

I do not know how long I stayed by his side, but I know that when a special kind of dread began to take hold of me my body was stiff when I forced it to move. I had no medical skill, only a woman's instincts on which to rely. Certainly it could have been only the latter that finally prompted me to an awareness that, should I do nothing further, I was fated to watch my patient until he died. His grip on my hand had suddenly slackened, as though he were already slipping away. The fever was worse, and Farrel's whole body burned at my touch. Finally, I had to wipe away a tell-tale trickle of blood that seeped from the corner of his mouth.

I suddenly knew that I had to save this man's life. It was more important to me than anything else I had ever done.

As if compelled by some force outside myself, I moved towards the door and allowed my feet to carry me down-

stairs, certain only at that moment that I must find help of some kind, if only reassurance that I had done my best. He had gone far beyond any comfort I could give him.

The lights were still burning, but the house seemed deserted. I went into the dining room, and checked for a moment at the sight of Reddish Constantine's empty chair. The remains of the meal were still on the table, the other chairs left as they had been as their occupants had pushed them back. My foot struck against something hard and I looked down to see the pistol that the Reverend Williams had dropped, lying cold and impersonal on the polished boards. I bent and picked it up, and as I did so a sound caught my ear from the direction of the kitchens.

There was no reason for the dry taste of fear in my mouth, yet I could not rid myself of the feeling that something was wrong. Where were the servants? Why had the table not been cleared? Why had not Sharon or one of the girls come upstairs to help me?

'Who is there?' I called and walked towards the sound.

No one came out to meet me, which again was strange, then from the kitchen doorway I saw the figure pressed in the shadows, a figure I had thought never to see again.

'Ma'am, it's only me . . .'

Mother Moti. Why had she come back? She must have seen me at the *obeah* ceremony. She must be aware that I knew her for what she was. Smothering my fear, I stared coldly at the old woman as she came into the light. With some surprise I saw that she was more afraid of me; and in that moment I remembered her as she had bent over me that first day I had come to Gaytons, and I tasted again the bitterness of the healing draught she had held to my lips. I had no means of knowing the source of her skill, and for all I knew it may well have come from some contract with the devil. But I cared little, for she was going to help me save Farrel's life.

I said harshly, 'Captain Constantine is very ill. He has been shot. Fetch what you need and then come with me.'

Mother Moti stared at me as though I were some kind of ghost. 'Ma'am . . . I don't . . .'

The pistol hung heavily from my hand and I raised it, pointing the long barrel at her throat. It was no conscious act, but I was all at once aware that I would kill her should she not do as she was told.

'Hurry. There is not much time.'

I do not know whether it was the tone of my voice or the sight of the weapon that had its effect, but she mumbled something and made her way to her own quarters. I followed her, with a cold resolve not to let her out of my sight. After she had rummaged in a wooden chest and wrapped nameless things within a shawl she looked up to face me.

'Ah'm ready, ma'am.'

We went upstairs together, back to the side of Farrel's bed. His face was grey and his breathing was, if anything, shallower than when I had left him.

'If you harm him,' I told the old woman at my side, 'I shall kill you.'

She nodded, as if she knew I spoke the truth. 'Ah'll not harm him,' she said, 'but he's good and sick.'

'Don't talk—just attend to him.'

I do not know what it was I had expected this evil old woman to do, but there was little dramatic in the way she cared for her patient. To me, watching from the other side of the room, it seemed as though she did no more than poultice his wounds with some medication of her own contriving, and coax him to drink the liquids she compounded from the contents of her shawl, mumbling and chanting as did it. Once Farrel cried out, but not in pain. When she finally stood back, I saw that he was quieter, his breathing less ragged.

'I go now,' she said, edging towards the door.

'No,' I snapped, motioning at her with the pistol. 'Not until I am satisfied that the fever has gone.'

She moved back, watching me all the time.

'Mother Moti,' I said, 'why did you do it? Why did you take Matthew to that place? And why did you put the joujou on the doors? Weren't you happy in this house? Wasn't everyone good to you?'

She licked her lips and her eyes evaded mine. I realised that although she might well be frightened of what might be

waiting for her out there in the darkness of the trees, she was also very frightened of me. And at that moment I was the nearer of the two.

'The *Hun'gan* ... the priest ... he made me.' She cast a terrified glance at the window. 'Mother Moti not want to, ma'am. I ain't had nothin' to do with *obeah* before.'

Perhaps in other circumstances I might have felt a trace of pity for her, but now, after what had so nearly happened, she meant less than nothing to me. 'Then why did you start?'

'After Malachi kill Melindo, there ain't no one else to do it.'

So it had been Melindo in the beginning after all. And yet, *why?*

'Mother Moti,' I went on, determined now to learn the truth, 'why should anyone wish the Constantines harm? They looked after their people well, didn't they? Nobody has ever said that the Colonel was a bad master. And little Matthew ... why, he's never done anything bad to anyone.'

The old woman shifted her bare feet uneasily. 'People here long time make old magic. Melindo was daughter of de biggest *Hun'gan* ever, an' she tell people that we don't want whites on Constantine Cay no more. Say she make special magic and they go 'way.'

'And everyone believed her?' I did not hide my amazement.

'Old Colonel not walk ... she say that her spell from over the water.' Mother Moti shrugged her shoulders. 'Then Capt'n Farrel friendly wid her, all because he want island men for sponge fishing. But everyone say he become Melindo's creature. Everyone very happy about that.'

It had a kind of logic, I suppose. Aloud, I said, 'And Matthew?'

'When you bring boy, people say now it make no difference if old Colonel dies and Capt'n Farrel only busy on sea. Melindo say that with boy here it just same way it's always been. He grow up an' marry an' whites here forever, just like it been before. With Capt'n Farrel different ... he never marry, so no more Constantines.'

The Last of the Constantines. That seemed so fateful a phrase. Then I thought of all that had happened and how

much a part this old woman had played in it and I was swept by a cold anger. 'So Melindo decided to put a scorpion in the boy's bed,' I said relentlessly. 'Or was that you also?'

'No ma'am. That weren't Melindo. Weren't me neither. We didn't do nothin' 'bout that.'

There seemed to be no reason for her to lie at this point. But Mother Moti's denial puzzled me. All at once the pistol felt unbearably heavy in my hand, and a wave of weakness overcame me. There was a chair at my side, and I dropped into it gratefully.

'Capt'n sleep good now.' Mother Moti bent over her patient. 'Sweat come. Sure is best thing for fever.'

Beyond question, Farrel was breathing evenly, and the restless movements of his body had stopped. I looked down at the lean, gaunt face on the pillow, at peace at last, and something twisted inside me. That I should not have seen that this lonely, bitter man stood against the others—all of them—trying to wage his own battles, afraid to ask for help lest it be seen as a sign of weakness, now seemed so much worse. As if knowing I could never tell him of my discovery face to face, I was somehow impelled to action, and with my fingers I smoothed away the matted red hair from his brow. How misled I had been by the roughness of his tongue, his blunt and unequivocal approach to his fellow humans, yet I knew now that, although Farrel might never humble himself before any woman, he was worth two of Raoul Fernac, whose honeyed tones and sensual eyes could bring any feminine heart into confusion.

With tiredness blurring my thoughts I allowed myself to relax, and my eyes, unable to keep up the struggle any longer, closed at last.

Whether I slept or simply dozed fitfully, I do not know, but when I became fully conscious again Mother Moti had disappeared and the room was filled with a strange, coppery light. I glanced through the window to see the sun coming up over the trees as a huge, sullen ball, unlike anything I had seen before. But I paid little enough attention to it, for my whole concern was with Farrel. Fortunately he was sleeping

quietly, and when now I put my hand to his brow it was dry and cool.

The relief of that moment was followed at once by the realisation that I was desperately thirsty, and I pulled at the bell cord to summon one of the house servants. Usually, it was only a matter of seconds before answering feet would patter along the corridor outside, but on this occasion I was rewarded only with a silence that was curiously all-encompassing. With one last glance at the sleeping figure, I went downstairs, only to find the lower floor of Gaytons as deserted as it had been the night before. I went into the kitchen and slaked my thirst from a pitcher of water, and then called at the open door.

'Ham! Mother Moti!' My voice echoed eerily in the silence. Filled now with concern I turned back, to discover Isobel, a shabby wrap pulled about her, studying me from the doorway. Her face looked blotched and old. I could only wish I felt compassion for her.

'I heard someone call,' she said.

'I was trying to find the servants,' I told her. 'They seem to have disappeared.'

'They know my father's dead. Are you surprised they take advantage of it?'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'I suppose that's possible,' But I could not stop myself adding with some bitterness, 'Farrel also nearly died last night, but no one came to see.'

She turned away from the accusation in my eyes, shrugging slightly as though her brother's life was of no concern to her. I found myself remembering the empty chair in the dining room and wondered perhaps if the Colonel meant more to her than I realised. The manner of his death must have shocked her.

'Your father . . .' I started.

'We buried him last night,' she said harshly.

Instinctively, I half-turned to the window. Somewhere out there, I thought, would be a newly turned grave. One more among how many thousands in these distant lands. A narrow mound of sand that would be there for a little while, then slowly level itself and be forgotten.

'In this climate, such matters have to be attended to quickly,' Isobel said. She drew in her breath. 'There was no time for formalities, you understand. We had no priest, of course. A pity. We might have asked the Reverend Williams, might we not?' She laughed shrilly.

'Please,' I said, 'please, Isobel. Why don't you rest for a while longer? I shall attend to things here.'

She stared at me for a moment, as though doing her best to understand my words. Then finally, she turned to make her way back upstairs.

For what seemed a long time I stood looking after her, then pulled myself together with a conscious effort. It had been easy enough to agree with her suggestion that the servants had vanished simply by reason of their master's death, but within myself I was not convinced. There was something wrong in this house, something terribly wrong, that went much further than Reddish's death, or the wounding of Farrel. Those were human actions, but what I could feel was something deeper and far more evil.

I forced myself to go back through the kitchen and out towards the servants' quarters beyond. For a moment I stood listening in the strange, unearthly silence that seemed to fill the very air, while the great glowing copper sun hung low in the sky, huge and menacing. Then I jumped as a footstep crackled on the tinder dry frond of palms. Someone was walking towards me round the corner of the house, and in the next moment I saw that it was Malachi.

13

IT WAS SOMETIME since Malachi had left the island to find refuge aboard the *Minator*, and I had almost put the big negro from my mind. I forgot now the dreadful thing of which he had been accused and could only think how thankful I was to see a friendly face. With a small cry I started to run towards him.

'Mis' Trudy . . .'

Malachi turned towards me, his dark face split in a grin of pleasure at the sight of someone familiar. Only then did I notice that his garments were wringing wet, that his huge chest was heaving as though from some heavy exertion. I stared at him, as if already sensing that evil was spreading even beyond the shores of this island.

'Ah done swim from the *Minator*, ma'am,' he answered my unspoken question.

'But Malachi—why? You could have rowed yourself ashore. There are barracudas out there in the deep.'

The negro said briefly, 'One of the boys done take the rowboat last night and he ain't brung it back. An' I had to see th' captain mighty fast.'

There was something in the way he spoke that confirmed my fears that his visit was of more than casual importance. We both knew he was risking his life in being seen here on Constantine Cay.

'Malachi . . . *what is it?*'

He jerked his head towards the copper-hued sky. 'There's hurricane comin' ma'am. Like to be bad.'

'But the islanders say it won't come to anything. That it often gets to look like this before the hurricane season sets in.' My voice trailed away as I caught the expression in his eyes. 'Doesn't it?'

Malachi shook his head. 'Not like this, ma'am. These fellows been telling lies. I got one back on board ship an' ah *know* he tell truth. I tell you, we all's going to have one mighty big blow.'

I should have been afraid by his news, but I think my greater fears of the unknown, my fears for Farrel's life had left me little room to be afraid of a bad storm caused by nature, not by human hands. Perhaps too there was still some previously unexplored corner of my mind that remained curiously undisturbed.

'Then you had best find Captain Fernac,' I said. 'I haven't seen him this morning, but he is doubtless somewhere about the house.'

'I done see the capt'n already, ma'am. He gone to fine a boat to get you all to the *Minator*.'

I frowned, not understanding him. 'With a hurricane coming? It's out of the question. Besides, there's a wounded man in the house . . .'

Malachi looked down at me, and there was an unfamiliar ring of authority in his voice when he answered. 'Ma'am, ah tell you, there ain't no place for you to be when that blow gets here but out at sea, just 'bout far 'way from land as you can get.' He made a swift, but graphic gesture with a huge black arm, taking in the house, the trees and indeed the whole of Constantine Cay. 'Mis' Trudy, you ain't never seen a hurricane, but you gonna get waves fifty, maybe sixty, feet high. Now you have a look at this island. Maybe two mile across an' as flat as a plate. You get a big blow an' the sea goin' to wash clear *over* it.'

The sheer logic of this left me staring at him helplessly. I had never seen a hurricane, but I had heard enough about them from my father to acknowledge Malachi's words as being reasonable enough. Constantine Cay *was* flat, and with

little width to absorb any major flooding. If the waves rose to even half of sixty feet they would sweep across the whole width of the Cay as though it were no more than a sandbank in the path of an incoming tide. The quay, the boats—even Gaytons itself would simply vanish beneath a wall of water. By the time the wave had passed, the island would be swept clean.

As steadily as I could I said, 'You had better get yourself something to eat in the kitchens. I must attend to Captain Constantine.'

'He is the one you says is hurt?'

I nodded. 'Yes. He has a bullet wound in his chest.'

'You reckon he can move hisself?'

'I don't know,' I confessed. 'Truly, Malachi, I don't know. That is what I must find out.'

My companion glanced up at the sky. 'We ain't got much time. Maybe I can carry the captain. Can't do no more harm than stayin' here.'

And that was true enough, I thought grimly, as I started back up the stairs. Then, as though I could not stop myself, I paused and looked down.

'Malachi . . .'

'Yes, ma'am?' The huge black man was still as he looked up at me, waiting for me to speak.

'Malachi . . . is it true that you killed the girl Melindo?'

'Yes, ma'am.' The big, dog-like eyes regarded me steadily. 'I done kill her.'

'But . . .' I caught my breath, for my voice sounded high and unnatural. 'But, Malachi—*why?*'

'She was big *obeah* witch, ma'am. She put her hex on Mas' Matthew. Pretty soon she kill him good.'

I said hoarsely, 'But she was one of your people. You can't believe . . .'

'I believe it.' Suddenly the big negro's voice was soft but full of a strange passion. 'Long time back, I knew girl who get killed because she get *obeah* spell put on her. And, ma'am, this is a bad place for that stuff. You hear cocks callin' in night when cocks ain't no reason to be doin' any such thing?'

I nodded, numbly. I had heard them. I remembered the look in the servants' eyes that first night, a look of fear. Perhaps I should have guessed that they had not been cocks after all.

'That's *obeah* folk talkin'.' Malachi was breathing heavily. 'Me, I been round world an' seen all kinds of things. Reckon I know which gods is strong and which ain't. An' I sure know that if that Melindo want to go after Mas' Matthew, she could do it all right. There ain't no reasoning with the likes of her. Can't pay no money to buy her off. Can't ask her. There only one way to fix it, an' that's what I done.' He stopped, then said in a different voice: 'I don't like killin,' ma'am. You reckon I done wrong?'

For a long moment I looked at him. Then I said gently, 'I don't know, Malachi. I simply don't know.'

At any other time I would have fought against the very thought of allowing Farrel to move, but now the alternative was a hundred times worse. I prepared myself to force him ruthlessly from his bed, to urge him downstairs at whatever cost, but as I went into his room I saw with a flood of relief that he was awake and regarding me gravely from his pillow.

'I think you saved my life last night, Trudy. I . . .'

'It is of no consequence now,' I returned brusquely, 'there are more important things.'

Something in my face must have given me away for he said at once, 'What is the matter?'

His voice was weak, but steadier than I had expected, and it was clear that the fever had left him.

'The servants have all gone,' I told him. 'There's only Malachi and he's swum from the ship.'

'Swum? For God's sake, why?'

'To warn us of the hurricane that's coming.' I repeated as best I could what Malachi had told me, and Farrel listened without speaking.

'It could be true enough. The really big ones don't come very often, but when they do they leave little enough behind them. I was blind yesterday—much too blind. There can always be a freak.' He took a deep breath. 'Fernac's best chance is to get the *Minator* out to sea. A good vessel should

ride out almost any storm, but if he's caught close into land he won't have a chance.' Again he paused, as if gathering his strength. 'You'd best get the boy and we'll go down to the shore.'

I noticed that there was the gleam of sweat on Farrel's face, more noticeable even than the scar. 'You can't get there alone,' I told him. 'I'll fetch Malachi.'

'The boy first. I'll manage well enough.' He pushed back the bedclothes and swung his legs with an effort out of bed. 'Wait. I think I might need help with my boots.' There was the faintest gleam of humour in his eyes.

'You haven't the strength to pull a boot on.' I spoke shortly, more to cover the wave of emotion that came over me. This man's life had been saved once. I was not going to leave him behind now . . . but how he would manage to walk I dared not think. I went to the row of closets that lined one wall and found a pair of soft leather slippers. I bent to pull them over his bare feet, praying my hands did not tremble. Then I found a white silk scarf that I slipped over his head to make a rough sling. 'Now.'

He got to his feet somehow, although I saw his face go grey with the effort it cost him. It took all my will power not to reach out and offer him my hands. For a moment he stood there, rocking, till he gripped the bedhead with a free hand to steady himself.

'The boy,' he growled, 'go and get the boy.'

I roused Matthew and all together we descended the stairs. In the unnatural silence that had settled on the place I could hear every agonised breath that Farrel took. Half way down Malachi came out of the kitchen and ran forward, but was warned off with a shake of the head. Just what it cost Farrel to make that journey from his room to the hall I shall never know. Perhaps it was an effort of will that was necessary. Perhaps it fulfilled something within him that he thought he had lost, but whatever the reason I knew, just as Malachi must have seen instinctively, that this was a journey he had to accomplish alone. For myself I realised it was no more than I would expect of this proud man who would give in to no one. Only when he had reached the bottom of the stairs

did he allow himself a hand on the negro's shoulder, and it was in this way that the four of us moved out into the airless silence.

Then, just as if the meeting had been arranged, we saw Raoul coming at a run towards the house.

Malachi stepped forward. 'You got boat, capt'n?'

Raoul Fernac stopped as he drew close to us, breathing heavily. His face was twisted into a mask of such fury as I had never seen before.

'There are no boats.'

Farrel stiffened. 'Then take one of the sponge boats, man. There are half a score of them down by the quay.'

Raoul gave him a look of extraordinary malevolence. 'Fool! I said there are *no* boats. Your spongers have gone along with the rest. There isn't a craft of any sort on this side of the island—or anywhere else, from what I can guess.'

I heard my own voice saying: 'And no men, either. The house has been empty of servants since last night. I suppose it was they who took the boats.'

'It would seem so,' Farrel agreed, 'but I do not know what good it will do them.'

'Isn't this what they always planned?' Mother Moti's words had come flooding back to me. 'They always wanted to be rid of all the Constantines. They even made some kind of spells so that the hurricane would come. Now it *is* coming, and they are abandoning the Cay while there is still time.'

'And leaving us to fend for ourselves.' Farrel shrugged his shoulders. 'Sometimes I wonder if we can blame them. They never asked for us to come, so why not be rid of us by whatever means they can.' He glanced towards Malachi. 'Where would they go?'

'To one of the islands with some high ground?' Malachi stared out over the copper-hued sea. 'Exuma, maybe suh, or New Providence. Either way I reckon they'll get there in time.'

'And we are left here with nothing.' Raoul raked the beach with a wolfish stare. 'Not so much as a canoe . . . I *must* find a boat. None of you has any idea of what importance it is . . .'

'Raoul!' There was a rustle of a dress and then Lucy had rushed past me, her eyes dilated with excitement. 'Raoul, what is it? There's no one about. I cannot even find Mother, or Charles.'

'I do not know about your parents, *chérie*, but the rest have gone, and taken their boats with them, leaving me with the *Minator* a mile off shore.' He looked from one of us to the other. 'But I will find a way to reach her.'

'There must be a boat somewhere. It is impossible that they have taken them all.' Lucy spoke in a shrill imperious voice as she came to stand beside Raoul. I thought she might be afraid, but when I looked towards her there was certainly no fear in her eyes. Rather there was a strange look of exultation about her, as if the time of crisis had been brought about solely for her benefit.

Then I turned away, for Raoul was speaking. 'Impossible, but they have nevertheless succeeded in bringing it about,' he informed her bitterly. 'Besides, they are not fools, these island people. They would not have gone to such lengths to discommode us only to leave us a route for retreat. If there is anything left at all, you may rest assured they have stove it in. They think we will all die and they are probably right.'

As the import of his words sank in there seemed little to say. Then the silence was broken by a whisper from Matthew to Farrel. I did not catch his words, but Raoul's ears must have been sharper, for in one swift movement he pulled the child into the centre of the circle.

'What did you say, boy?'

'I . . . I said nothing of importance.'

'What did you say?'

I think we were all rooted to the ground as Matthew's voice came out uncertainly, a little afraid of the sudden ferocity of this man. 'I . . . I was only telling Uncle Farrel that there is my boat.'

'Your boat?' Raoul's dark eyes seemed to narrow fractionally, like those of a cat. 'Since when did you have a boat, my young friend?'

'Uncle Farrel gave her to me. He was teaching me to sail

only we didn't tell anyone because it was going to be a surprise.' He drew a deep breath. 'That's why we hid her.'

'Quiet, Matthew,' Farrel's voice cut in, 'that's enough.'

'On the contrary, it is not yet half enough.' Raoul moved forward with a swift, pantherish step, and before I realised his intention, jerked Matthew even closer to his side.

'Raoul!' This time I must have moved forward instinctively, for afterwards I had no memory of my action, only the steel-like grip on my shoulder as I was rudely thrust back.

'Do not let us grow emotional,' Raoul's mouth twisted in a brief smile as he released me. 'What is the boy to you, anyway? He is no more of your blood than mine.'

His untimely revelation drew a flash of elation to Lucy's green eyes, but at that moment Farrel lurched past me, a look of such murderous intent in his face that it made me catch my breath. Desperately weak though he was, I think he might well have closed with Raoul had not the latter taken a step back, at the same time drawing a pistol from his belt. For a moment I truly imagined that the intended to shoot Farrel down, but instead he swung the weapon back for a vicious blow to Farrel's unprotected head.

'No!' The intensity of Matthew's scream froze us all. There was a wild terror in the boy's voice and in his face that was almost unearthly in its intensity as he stared towards Raoul. 'Please no,' he sobbed. 'Not again . . . not again.'

The silence after that was an almost tangible thing. Raoul's smouldering eyes rested on Matthew with a look I could not fathom. It was as though something unspoken had passed between them. Then Raoul lowered his hand until the pistol pointed steadily at Farrel.

'You have had one bullet through you already, my friend. I suggest you do not force me to give you another.' Then to Malachi he barked, 'Bring the boy. He will tell us where the boat is soon enough.'

'Lucy . . .' I broke off with my appeal unspoken, for one glance at the girl told me that I could expect but little help from her. I was seeking some plea that might find some response with Raoul when Farrel spoke up beside me.

'There is no need to take the child. The boat is not far

from the beacon light, hard by the quay. He covered it with palm fronds last time we used it.'

A breath of wind stirred the tops of the trees, and the pattering of the leaves sounded unnaturally loud in the silence. Here and there I saw the surface of the sea stir and flecks of white showed momentarily against the blue.

'The boy will come with us anyway, in case you are lying.' Raoul's eyes moved between Farrel and myself. 'You two will stay here.'

'You'll make quite, quite certain that they do stay here, won't you, Raoul?'

I think Lucy's words and the quiet intensity behind them had more effect on me than Raoul's ruthless obsession to save the gold. As yet, the knowledge that he might well decide to kill both Farrel and me had yet to conjure up any sense of terror in my heart. Yet Lucy made me feel far more afraid.

As she looked at me I saw that strange far-away glitter in her eyes that I had noticed more than once, as if she had slipped away into another world, only now there was a wildness about her, as if she barely had herself under control.

She swayed a little and there was a twitching about her mouth as it bared itself in a savage little smile. In that Southern, sing-song voice that had once sounded so pretty to me, she said, 'Put them in the ice-house, Raoul. They won't escape from there.'

Beside me I heard Farrel's sharp intake of breath, but by then Raoul was urging us back into the house, through the hall and into the kitchen area beyond at the point of a gun. I knew of this place, but I had never seen inside the heavy trap door that was its only entrance. In an effort to avoid the burning rays of the sun, the ice house at Gaytons had been dug down deep into the ground to form, as it were, a kind of dry well.

I shrank back from that tomb-like place, but Raoul had already raised the iron lifting ring of the trapdoor and was gesturing to us to go down. Still I did not move until Lucy gave me a vicious little push.

'Go down,' she said, 'or we'll throw you down.' The

strident tone of her laughter seemed to echo all round that dreadful place.

'Why,' I said slowly, 'you must be mad, Lucy . . . you cannot possibly know what you are doing.'

She laughed again and would have moved towards me had not Farrel put his arm between us and nodded to me that he would go ahead.

There was a ladder that led down to the dark depths and with the chill of terror on me now I watched him step on to it.

I looked at Raoul, pleading, and then to Farrel's arm, pulled tight to his chest with its sling.

'Raoul,' I protested, 'he can't . . .'

'I don't doubt the gallant captain has done more stirring deeds in his time,' Raoul returned politely but inexorably. 'Please. I have little time.'

Farrel faced the ladder and began to make his way unsteadily down it, holding on as best he could with his usable hand. Standing as I was in the daylight, it seemed as though the figure beneath me was vanishing into a darkness that was almost solid.

The pistol jerked again. 'Now you.'

There was no point in doing other than as I was told. Uncertainly I followed Farrel down to the bottom of the pit where I could just see that the walls were covered in straw-packed ice. The change in the temperature made me gasp aloud with shock as I stepped off the last rung of the ladder to join Farrel. I glanced once more upwards to where Raoul's head peered down through the opening a dozen feet above. Perhaps this was all some hideous game. He could not leave us here. *He could not.*

But I was wrong. 'You will forgive me if I leave you now.' His mouth puckered into that now-hated smile. 'Console yourselves that at least you can face the heat of the day in more comfort than usual.'

He leaned forward and, seizing the top of the ladder, dragged it upwards towards him. For a minute I watched him in despair as he stood, drawing it out hand over hand, until

the last rung disappeared over the lip of the pit. Then the heavy trapdoor slammed shut and Farrel and I were alone.

For a moment I must confess that I felt a wild terror sweep through me. As a child I had always had an unreasoning fear of the dark, and now it all came back to me as I stood there deep in the earth with the pitch darkness smothering me. I turned blindly to the other living thing that shared my terror with me, catching at Farrel's arm and being rewarded with a quiet gasp of pain.

'I'm sorry, I forgot . . .' The very normal action restored some of my control, but I still stayed close to him. 'You must forgive me,' I went on, 'I have always behaved like a child in the dark.'

'There is always some kind of dark for each of us.' His good arm moved slightly and I felt his hand touch my hair. 'I fear I have been a poor sort of help to you today, cousin.'

'You heard what Raoul said. I'm not your cousin. I'm not even Matthew's sister.'

'That is hardly a matter of vast importance—particularly now. I have known it for long enough.'

'You know?' Surprise overcame some of my fear. 'But how?'

'From Matthew.' And then as he must have sensed I was about to speak: 'Oh, it was through no intent of his, but he is a small boy to keep so great a secret. He would speak of you when we were about together, and a boy is too used to a sister about the place to make overmuch of her in conversation. Moreover, he lies badly, as a few well-placed questions were enough to find out. And then there was the odd slip as to your name. Which is Judith, is it not?'

'Yes,' I told him, 'it is Judith. But there was a reason for the deception, and a good one.'

'You shall tell me sometime, if it pleases you; but not now. We have more important matters on our minds.'

'Farrel.' Even as I spoke his name and formed the question I had to ask, I was not afraid any more. For the first moment for a long time I felt that I was not alone.

'Yes, Judith.'

'If we are still down here when the waves come, we shall be drowned, shall we not?'

'Oh, yes, it is more than possible, but I hope we will not be here. I have no intention of sitting to await a watery grave. Besides, I no longer have only myself to think about. I have you. And then there is Matthew—we must find him.'

'There is Lucy to watch over him,' I started.

'Hmm. Do not expect too much of my niece. She has always been ... shall we say a little moon-crazed, but we have all been able to ignore it. I know my sister felt if she closed her eyes the weakness in her daughter would go away. I have never believed that, but like the rest of the family, I hoped. Now, today, I have seen something of the real Lucy who lurks beneath the skin of the spoilt and pampered child. I can only pray that this day's happenings will not unhinge her. Much will depend on our friend Fernac. She has set her heart on him, and I do not think she can be thwarted. A bow string so finely tuned can easily snap.'

So this was the cause of Lucy's sometimes strange manner, her will-o'-the-wisp moods, the way her eyes sometimes clouded. The need to get to Matthew was even more urgent if Raoul was not to harm him.

I turned to Farrel, but before I could speak he said again, 'Judith.' In the darkness he smiled, but I know not how I was so certain of that.

'Yes?' I whispered.

'Only that it is a pleasant name. Gertrude is a plain, sullen girl. I know that from my dead brother. She has no spirit. You could never have fitted into her mould.'

Suddenly, all the horrors, all the fears and emotions that had lived with me now for weeks, seemed to press against me and tears I could not control sprang into my eyes.

As though he really could see me I felt a finger touch my cheek. 'Why, Judith, you are crying. Are you afraid?'

'No, not really, now that I am with you; it is just that at every moment I reach out to touch something good, it always slips away.'

'No, not always. And you will find me a difficult man to shake off once I have seen what I want. And it is you I want,

Judith. I have known that ever since I saw you covered with dirt on the deck of my sponge boat, raging at me in your anger.' There was a movement beside me and his lips were on mine, strong and sure.

For a moment I clung to him, then I drew sharply away. 'Farrel . . . you know nothing about me. I . . . I have to tell you my father was a slaver. It was he who was the man who died aboard the *Minator* . . .' And I gabbled quickly something of the discovery I had made. 'Perhaps I too am tainted . . .'

'Oh, Judith, Judith, there is good and bad in all of us. It matters not what went before. Do you need me to tell you again?'

This time when he finally let me go it was with a sense of wonderment that I realised I could see the dim outline of him, standing there before me. I put it down to some magic of the moment, as though my wildly beating heart had brought about some kind of miracle in the dark.

Hearing my voice shake, I said, 'I can see you . . .'

'It's our eyes getting used to this place. Look up, and you'll notice we're not entirely without light.'

I did as I was bid and saw that a glimmer of daylight still did, in fact, filter down through a split in the rough planks of which the hatch was constructed. It was little enough, but as my eyes grew increasingly accustomed to the gloom I found that I could make out the ice blocks on either side, and even the shape of our prison, towering funnel-like overhead.

Farrel touched one of the straw-covered blocks. 'I told you we would not be staying here. Since we have been given building bricks, it is our own fault if we do not make use of them.'

I watched as he stepped on the lowest block and raised himself cautiously, but then I pulled him back. 'You had best let me do that,' I told him. 'You are in no condition to climb, as well you know.'

Either there was something in my voice that allowed no question, or Farrel had sensed his weakness even in that tentative step, for he fell back, breathing heavily. Taking his place, I found that with one strong arm to help me I could

mount the blocks easily enough, for the straw gave my feet a sure grip.

'Here,' Farrel said suddenly below me, 'there's some kind of pole they must have used to push the blocks into place. See if you can open the hatch.'

I took the pole as I was bid, and struck upwards towards the slit of light. It made a hollow sound, not unlike a drum, but though I swung my weapon upwards repeatedly, the wooden hatch remained fast.

'It's no use,' I cried. 'It must be bolted on the other side.' I stared upwards in frustration, and as I did so it seemed to me that something uncanny was happening. Without effort on my part a line of light had appeared round the edge of the hatch, broadening slowly. A moment later the hatch itself was thrown open and I shut my eyes at the sudden shaft of daylight that came flooding down.

Standing there on the ice blocks with eyes fast closed, I could almost believe that the miracle was of my doing. But then a voice spoke from above, and I opened them again to realise the truth. A man's head and shoulders showed over the edge of the opening, dark against the light.

'Who's there, then? Who were knocking?'

'Stockwell!' Farrel's voice cried out below me in sudden excitement. 'Get the ladder, man, and help us out!'

I had never felt overmuch affection for the Constantines' overseer, but I must confess that his rough, unshaven face seemed like a thing of beauty at that moment. It was with a sense of almost overwhelming relief that I watched his figure disappear and then the end of the ladder slide over the edge and descend towards us. I gripped it, laughing a little foolishly, half-way between laughter and tears, and scrambled up to the world again as best I could. A few moments more and Farrel was beside me, while Job Stockwell stared at us with astonishment on his face.

'Have you seen anything of Captain Fernac and the boy?' Farrel demanded.

'Nay, I can't say as I have.' The overseer shook his head. 'I came up from Smithstown quick as I could. I tell you, all hell's broke loose down there.'

'What's happened?'

'Word got around that the blacks were leaving the Cay because of the storm, and the whole damn lot of loonies went even madder than they are already. What boats they'd got couldn't take the half of them. Then they take it into their heads to get aboard Mr. Williams's, much at the same time as he turns up himself.'

So that was where the preacher had gone! I should have guessed at it before.

'Well?' Farrel's voice was hard.

Job Stockwell shrugged his shoulder. 'Well, sir, you know as well as I do what the gentleman's like. He rushed into the water waving his arms and crying that they should have his boat, and that he gave it to them freely, as though they weren't going to take it anyway.'

'And so they left him behind?'

Stockwell gave me an odd look. 'Aye, ma'am, you could say that. He just stood there in the water wi' his arms stretched out an' they ran over him. There was too many to get into the boat anyway, an' by the time they'd finished they'd turned her over.'

'And Mr. Williams?'

'Like I said, they just ran over him. I were back in the trees, keeping out of the way. But I didn't ever see him again.'

14

WE WENT DOWN to the beach, more I think to confirm what we already knew rather than in any hope that Raoul and Matthew would still be there. Job Stockwell did not accompany us, preferring to take his horse and ride on up the island in a last effort to find some kind of boat. I wished him luck, but he did not answer, and the last I saw of him was the sight of his mount picking its way through the palms, as though he, at least, had some idea as to where he planned to go.

Raoul had vanished by the time Farrel and I set foot on the sand, and all that remained of him was the sight of Matthew's little boat, as it made its way under a scrap of sail towards the distant *Minator*. I could not even see how many were in the boat.

Farrel touched my arm. As if he knew how desperate were my thoughts he said, 'There's Malachi. He will tell us what has happened.'

Disbelieving, I followed the direction of his pointing finger and saw that it was true. The big negro was tramping along the beach, and when he caught sight of us he broke into a run.

I started to move towards him. 'Has he hurt Matthew?' I caught at his arm as he came up, driven to ask the question although in my heart I dreaded the answer.

'It ain't the capt'n you got to worry 'bout.' Malachi gave me a strange look. 'No ma'am, it's Miss Lucy got the boy.

An' Miss Lucy kill him, sure enough if we don't find her quick.'

'What do you mean—Miss Lucy?' Farrel said harshly. 'Don't talk like a fool.'

'Master Matthew's boat ain't got room for more than two,' Malachi replied doggedly. 'The capt'n he say there ain't room for either Miss Lucy or the boy . . . but that he would come back for her later.'

Dry mouthed, I asked, 'And what did Miss Lucy say to that?'

Malachi's big red-rimmed eyes regarded me uncomfortably. 'She try to make him take her, but he push her away. Miss Lucy done go a little mad and say that if he was leavin' her behind then there ain't no room on Constantine Cay for two Constantines. If he didn't kill the boy, then she would.'

With a curious detachment I found myself thinking that no normal person would shout such terrible threats, even in temper, but, then . . . Lucy was no longer a normal person.

I listened to Malachi's deep voice, stumbling a little as he described those moments at the water's edge, and the scene took on a kind of frightening reality. I could see the desperate intensity in Lucy's eyes, just as I could picture the dawning terror in Matthew and the cold contemptuous dismissal from Raoul.

'My dear Lucy, it is no good uttering such childish threats. We have the boat and therefore the boy has fulfilled his purpose. I have no intention of having his blood on my hands.'

'But he's stealing my inheritance, do you hear?' she screamed. '*My* inheritance,' And then as she saw her words were having little effect on him she started to plead: 'Raoul, you cannot leave me here . . . you *must* take me with you.'

'There is no question of *must* in anything I do. You can see for yourself that with you in the boat it would only hold me up. I've told you I will return.' Then he bent over the stern of the boat. '*Allons-y!* Push, Malachi, push. It is time we were on our way.'

Farrel looked at the big negro. 'But you did not go?'

'No, boss.' Malachi shook his head. 'I see that Capt Fernac ain't no intention of returning for Miss Lucy, that she is not

right in the head, so I say I ain't goin' to leave Master Matthew alone wi' Miss Lucy, and the capt'n say I'm a fool, and to push him out all the same. So ah pushes him off the sand, an' he sail for the *Minator*.'

'And Matthew . . .' Fear was clutching at my heart.

'When ah done finish pushing out the boat Miss Lucy got Master Matthew and had run off wi' him to the trees. Ah tries to catch her, but she got too much start. When ah gets to the top of the beach there ain't no sign of her anywhere. Ah'm sorry, Miss Trudy, I should have run faster . . . now I have to go and find him.'

Now my heart was like a stone. 'Why did he go with her, Malachi? He must have been so afraid?'

'He's mo' 'fraid of me, ma'am. I reckon she told him that I was coming after them to kill him.'

I stared out over the water at the tiny patch of white that marked Raoul's sail. He was more than half-way to his ship, I calculated, and then I realised that it mattered little enough now whether he reached her or not. Raoul and the *Minator* and his obsessive greed for gold were no longer a part of my life. I had other things to think about . . . but before that, Matthew had to be found.

As I was about to turn away, the sail became lost in a curious blossoming of what seemed to be a thousand similar sails. The leaden coloured sea that had until that moment stretched sullenly to the great, menacing bronze bowl of the sky on the far horizon, was stirring itself, and white flecks of water appeared everywhere. From out of the deathly stillness a sound rose up, like the vibration of some enormous celestial harp string.

Behind us, the palm trees moved, the fronds coming alive with a curious, pattering sound.

Then came the wind.

It came rushing off the sea with a moan that rose steadily until it seemed to fill the world, driving in not as a gust, but with an appalling pressure that flung me sprawling onto the sand. I felt Malachi's hands grip my shoulders and drag me up, and I saw that he was shouting.

'It start now!' His voice was at my ear, raised to full pitch,

but even so I found it hard to hear. 'Back . . . get back from the sea!'

As if at a signal, the great glowing copper ball of the sun merged with the haze and an unnatural dusk closed in on the land. Blindly, driven by some kind of animal sense of preservation, the three of us stumbled towards whatever shelter the line of palms could offer. And all the time Farrel's good hand was in mine, holding me as if in a grip of steel.

Once among the trees we paused, gasping, seeking a momentary respite. The wind was whipping the sand up with it, and it scorched across the bare flesh of my arms like a thousand red hot needles. With my back against the broad trunk of a silk tree I huddled close to Farrel.

'Where would she have taken him?'

'We must head towards the old beacon.' And then in answer to my unspoken question: 'She would at least try to save her own skin. The beacon is strong and it's the highest point on the Cay.' He closed his eyes. 'I cannot think where else there is to look. We have no time, no time at all.'

'The house?' I shouted.

'She was not heading for the house. And she would be insane to go there.'

She was insane anyway, I thought. But Malachi was already moving off, and Farrel was pulling me with him, head down, through the groaning trees. Lightning was beginning to flicker across the sky, throwing up the path in sudden vivid relief.

'Farrel—Listen!' I shouted.

The two men must have heard me, for they stopped. Over the wind there was a new sound, a steady harsh muttering, drawing rapidly closer.

'Rain come,' Malachi glanced briefly over his shoulder. 'Must hurry.'

But there was a limit to the speed we could make, and the rain caught us within seconds—a driving, mind-numbing deluge that slashed through the trees, stripping the fronds and bringing with them a shower of coconuts that tore murderously through the air like cannonballs. In an instant my dress clung about me in a confining mass of sodden cotton, and I

was forced to release Farrel's hand and hold both my own before my face lest I be blinded by the stinging drops. I had long abandoned any thought of where I might be going. My whole exitsence seemed concentrated on the single thought of keeping my companions in sight, and praying that one of them would lead us to safety.

It seemed that I had half-run, half-stumbled for an age, but it may well have been only minutes, for I had lost all sense of time. But suddenly, with a sense of unutterable relief, I became conscious of something dark and solid ahead of me, towering up out of the storm. I raised my head and, turning my back to the wind so that I could breathe, saw that we had indeed arrived at the beacon.

I stumbled uncertainly into the overgrown ditch that had once surrounded its base and could not suppress a shudder of horror at the rustling in the long grass at my feet. On every side, the wild things that dwelt in the lonely places of the Cay were fleeing from their accustomed haunts, driven by some special sense of impending disaster. Indeed, as I pushed my way towards the time-worn steps on the far side I almost put my foot on an evil-looking mottled snake. Desperate though I was, I drew back in momentary fear, but I need not have worried, for the serpent glided smoothly on, more intent on its own preservation than on any thought of harming me.

'This way. Quickly.'

Farrel had reached the steps and had turned towards me, hand outstretched. But at the last moment I hung back.

'Wait . . . please wait.'

'We have no time to wait. Come, Judith . . .'

But I stubbornly stayed where I was, waist high in the undergrowth, half-blinded by the rain that lashed down on me. Even to myself I could not explain what it was that held me back, except that I was rooted to the spot, helpless in the grip of something far stronger than my own will. I knew only that I was listening above the shriek of the wind for something. Something . . . but what?

'Trudy . . . Trudy . . .'

'Matthew,' I cried, and plunged forward, heading blindly for the ancient archway beneath which I had plucked the

jessamine, what seemed an age ago. Huddled in the shadows, Matthew stared up at me, and so deep was the gloom that I was near enough to touch him before he recognised me, and threw himself into my arms.

'Hush.' It was not easy for me to speak myself, and I felt tears running down my face, warmer than the rain. 'Hush, you're safe now. Where is . . .'

I was not able to speak Lucy's name, but Matthew read my thoughts well enough.

'She left me and went on. She said I would be safer here, because the wind would not blow over me and she said Malachi would not be able to find me.'

'You have nothing to fear from Malachi, Matthew,' I told him. 'It was he who stayed behind to help you.' No, I thought with a sick feeling of revulsion, it was not Malachi he had to fear, nor even the wind. The place in which Lucy had left Matthew was in fact dug below the level of the surrounding land. It would need no very great wave to fill the old ditch, and it was not for nothing that the wild things were already abandoning their perilous home. For anyone to stay in such a place was to court instant death . . .

The wind suddenly roared into us almost lifting me off my feet and I knew that time was running out.

'Malachi!' I called wildly into the rain. 'Malachi . . .' and gave a sob of thankfulness as a giant shadow loomed over me. He picked Matthew up in an effortless gesture, swinging him over his shoulder like a sack. With his other hand he pulled me to my feet and dragged me to the steps.

It was as well he did. As we clambered upwards, white, creaming surf burst through the trees and crashed against the ancient stones. Possibly it was the sight more than the shock that made me stumble, but I remember the pain of my grazed knees on the stone and Farrel, with strength found from I know not where, seizing me by the shoulder and dragging me to my feet again.

'The top!' He was shaking me, forcing words into my dulled brain. 'We must get higher before the worst of the waves get to us!'

I did as I was told, until at last I found myself on what

had once been the roof of the old fort—the worn stone flags that had for the past century been used for a base on which to build the beacon fire. What parapet there was may have looked formidable enough from the ground, but seen at close quarters it was pitiably slight—a bare two feet of castellations, worn smooth and weathered in the sun.

'Get down! Stretch out flat!'

I lay as Farrel directed, flat against the wall, in order to draw from it as much shelter as I could. I had one arm around Matthew, whose face was buried in my shoulder, while Farrel's arm was around us both. We huddled together, all four of us, holding on as best we could to the few finger holds the stone afforded, our eyes shut fast, seeking nothing but a moment's respite from the tempest that screamed past on all sides of us.

I think Malachi must have had more courage than the rest of us, unless it was that he had lived with the sea long enough to accept it even at its worst. But I know that a tearing crash of thunder seemed to split the world in two, and I opened my eyes with real disbelief that the tower was still standing. In the flickering of the almost continuous lightning I saw Malachi kneeling against the parapet, staring out to sea with a look of almost holy awe on his face, like that of a priest who has come face to face with the object of his worship at last.

'Malachi,' I cried out, 'what is it?'

The negro seaman did not speak. Indeed I should not have heard him in any case above the sound of the elements. But I raised my head and followed the direction of his gaze and froze in a manner similar to his own. A wall of water was coming towards us out of the sea. Black water, white tipped, I saw it heave itself up with a slow and awful grandeur. At what speed it was travelling it was impossible to tell, but my impression in that moment was not speed but only endless time. It was as though I had knelt on the rain-soaked beacon platform for all my life, and that I should contitnue to do so until the day I died. And the way I watched the tidal wave rolling inexorably towards us I knew no fear, only a wonder and awe that such things could be.

Farrel cried sharply, 'Judith, for God's sake, get down!'

But I did not wish to get down. Instead I half rose, the better to see the spectacle. I watched the great wave reach the shore and swallow up the trees that lined the sand. For an instant the palm trunks projected from the belly of the water, splintered, dragged up by the roots, spinning wildly in the welter of foam at the wave's crest. I cried out with the marvel of it until the back of Farrel's hand smashed down across the side of my head, and I fell forward half-stunned, against him.

A moment later the wall of water crashed home against the old stones of the tower, and my world rocked and went dark and then was suddenly and magically silent.

* * *

I do not know how long that first, cataclysmic fury of the hurricane lasted. Later, I was to learn that before it slackened no fewer than forty vessels were lost in the waters around the islands. That in New Providence, the greater part of the seafront was destroyed, that in Nassau itself brick and even stone-built buildings were broken and scattered as though by an earthquake. The tidal wave that had flung itself over Constantine Cay had roared on at unabated speed and inundated a dozen other islands, but fortunately had missed the capital and finally died in an ineffectual assault upon the distant coast of Florida.

At the time, I was conscious only of an endless rush of sound. Stunned as I was by Farrel's blow, I knew nothing of the nightmare moment as the wave stormed by, but even after its passing I lay, pressed against the stones by the two men, while I still clutched a whimpering Matthew in my arms. Only after what seemed to be an age did I sense a lull in the shrieking of the wind, and I opened my eyes with a kind of wonder to discover that we were still alive.

'This may not last,' Farrel warned me as he helped me to rise, 'but at least we have survived so far.'

I stared out from the beacon over the world that seemed to bear but little relation to the one I knew. The sea was still slate-grey and wind-torn, but at least it was a natural thing

and not the ravening animal it had been but a short time before. The sky was still brassy, but there was a lighter streak discernible on the horizon that had not been there before, as though to give promise of something better to come. It was heartening, and indeed I had need of something to give me hope once my eyes had strayed from the sea to land.

Constantine Cay as I had known it had ceased to exist. The graceful palms that had once stood in such profusion had for the most part been torn out bodily by their roots and carried away, leaving behind a desolation of sodden grass and stretches of sea water that filled every hollow and plantation as far as the eye could see.

'Oh, Farrel,' I cried. 'Look at Gaytons.'

The house must have stood a good mile distant from our sanctuary, but even so it was easy enough to see that as a building it had been totally destroyed. Its site was identifiable enough, for the lower parts of the brick walls were still standing, although the roof and portico had gone. At first glance it was some long-abandoned building that a hundred years of neglect had driven back into the ground, and although in all conscience I had no reason to love the place, I felt a wave of sickness come over me at the sight.

'Ah reckon we just picked up the edge of that blow.' Malachi sniffed at the air like a dog. 'If you asks me, sub, we'll be all right from now on.'

'Oh, please may we go down?' Matthew was staring with fascination at the ground below, unmoved by the destruction on every hand. I was glad to see that. Perhaps he would also forget the horror of Lucy and Raoul.

Malachi said slowly, 'Ah' take you down if you like, Mas' Matthew.'

I waited, holding my breath, but with only the barest hesitation. Matthew smiled up at his one-time enemy and said 'All right.' Then: 'We'll see you later at Gaytons, Trudy.'

I watched the two figures, one huge, one small, vanish down the steps, then turned instinctively into Farrel's arms, to kiss and be kissed with a wild intensity and sense of need that I had never experienced before. I found myself remembering that I had once read how, after a great earthquake in classi-

cal times the survivors had behaved in just such a way, men and women who had never met before, making love openly in the streets in a kind of thank offering for life's return. I had read the words with disbelief at the time, but now, with Farrel's mouth on mine, it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

When I could speak, I said: 'Do you think what Malachi said is true—that the worst is over?'

'I'm prepared to believe it.' Farrel kissed me again, while I gloried in the feel of his hands against my rain-soaked body. And yet the world was not yet entirely our own to do with as we wished. There was Matthew to think of. As I thought of him going off for the first time, trustingly, in the company of Malachi, I wondered if the storm had cleansed him of all the old terrors. I said as much to Farrel, and he nodded, slowly.

'I hope so, but something tells me that the answer is not as simple as that. Our friend Fernac fits somewhere into the puzzle. There was a moment by the house—was it really only two or three hours ago—when I thought Matthew had transferred all his fear of Malachi to Fernac. There was terror in his voice when the gallant captain raised his gun to me, that had little to do with the moment, but whether we shall ever know, I have my doubts. It is for Matthew to tell us and not for us to ask. The boy has seen too much evil already. If he can forget, then that is the best way. Come,' he added, reaching for my hand, and with a depth of love in his eyes that made me tremble, 'we had best return and look at my home—no, *our* home.'

Without further words we descended the beacon and made our way along the beach, picking our way through the litter of coral, shells, and dead and dying fish. The wind still raged in from the east, but it had lost the greater part of its strength. Nevertheless, as we rounded the point, I was not surprised to discern a ship less than a mile off-shore, labouring in the still heavy seas.

It was a vessel that had clearly done its best to ride out the storm, only to suffer mortally in the contest. Low in the water, all three masts had gone, she wallowed beam on to the

seas, with an occasional wave breaking across her bows.

Beside me, Farrel cried, 'My God, it's the *Minator* . . .'

Now that the words were spoken I wondered how I could have missed seeing it for myself. There was no mistaking that black-painted hull, or the delicate fall away of her stern. It was the *Minator* beyond question, and not abandoned, for I could see the black shape of men clustered about her broken spars.

And there was something else besides. A figure, as wretched and wind-tattered as my own, but recognisable still, was standing a hundred yards ahead, staring like myself, at the distant vessel.

My hand tightened in Farrel's. 'It's Lucy,' I whispered.

How had she survived the storm? I did not know, but my hatred for her seemed to have fled with the last of the wind. There was something infinitely pathetic about that slight figure as she stared with longing at the distant ship, and I found myself almost hoping that Raoul would yet return to her and lead her back to the life of youth and gaiety that had been wrenched from her by the war. But that was a dream, I knew. Raoul would not come back, and Lucy was deranged, and nothing for her would ever come right again. And yet, I felt a need to comfort her, and I moved forward at the same moment as Farrel gave a cry of disbelief.

'Judith—the ship!'

There was something in his voice that pulled me up short. I stood and stared out at the *Minator*, and for a moment I could discern nothing that I had not seen before. Then I caught my breath . . .

'She's turning. She's coming about . . .'

Only common sense told me that such a thing was impossible. How could a dismasted ship come about? And then, as I watched, I realised with a kind of dazed disbelief, that the vessel was more than changing direction. She was actually turning on her own axis, slowly but surely, like some gigantic log spinning in some tremendous whirlpool.

'Oh, God help us all,' Farrel whispered. 'Judith, don't you see? It's the Hole. The Big Hole. Don't you remember?'

For a moment I did not, and then with a rush a memory

of an afternoon on the sponge boat came back to me, with Farrel telling of the old sponge divers' superstition, and their refusal to dive anywhere near the fabled hole and its attendant serpent that sucked ships down to the middle of the earth. Oh, I had joined in the laughter at the time, but now . . .

'It must be some formation of the seabed that produces a whirlpool after weather such as this.' Farrel seemed to be speaking almost to himself. 'It must be enormous. And they've no means of getting out of it . . .'

We stood there, just as did Lucy, some yards away. What was left of the *Minator* continued to turn, a little faster each time, until she circled, like some merry-go-round, out of control. Then, without warning, her bows dipped under. Waterlogged as she must have been, she did not linger. There was just a faint flurry of water, white against the still dark sea. Then she was gone.

'No,' Lucy screamed in terrible wild despair, 'No! No! No! No! . . .'

I had little reason to be over fond of Lucy, but there was such agony in her cry that I ran towards her and took her in my arms, but it was like holding a statue. The girl was absolutely rigid and showed no sign of recognising me. As I stared into her now lustreless eyes, I felt a sickening conviction that whatever reason had been left in her troubled mind had fled, and what I held was no longer Lucy Lavenham, but a pretty shell without hope or spirit. Time and love might work some kind of healing, but I had but little idea as to where she would find the comfort so vital for her tortured soul.

'She needs her mother.' Behind me, Farrel's voice was full of pain. 'God forgive me, but I had forgotten my sister. I fear neither she nor Charles will have lived through this. Had I but remembered . . .'

'You have no cause to blame yourself,' I said quietly. 'With your wound it is a miracle you survived yourself. You could have done nothing.' What I did not tell him was how, during that last terrible night, when I believed Farrel to be dying, Isobel did not give even five minutes of her time.

But I think Farrel must have recognised the truth of my words for, with Lucy between us, we turned away from the sea, and as though drawn by something outside ourselves, we made our way towards what had been Gaytons. We were immeasurably slowed by Lucy, who stumbled across the sand as though she were in some kind of trance, but as we almost reached the ruins we saw Malachi and Matthew. My heart leaped with relief to see that they were not alone. Charles Lavenham, coatless, his shirt in filthy rags, stumbled ahead, while the big negro supported his wife.

Isobel was a pitiable sight. White as a sheet, with her hair clinging in sodden strands, she whimpered like a hurt child, and I could guess she was in the aftermath of some kind of hysteria brought on by fear. It was Charles who took Lucy from us with a look of mute agony.

'We were in the kitchen.' I had not spoken, but he seemed to sense the question I had to ask. 'Got ourselves into the fireplace. Strongest place when the wave came.'

I found myself picturing that great brick structure that would certainly have shielded half a dozen people against almost any assault of nature, and tried to imagine the terror of the moment when that wall of water had crashed against the house, to rage on, almost unchecked, through windows and doorways. Probably Charles and Isobel would have been totally submerged for an instant or two, and in my mind I could see them struggling to keep their place in their refuge as the water stormed on and the house tumbled about them. No wonder Iosbel was distraught. I looked with pity on Charles, who now must do what he could for a bemused wife and broken daughter.

I touched the shoulder of Lucy, who was clinging to her stepfather, still unaware of her surroundings. 'Raoul Fernac is dead,' I told Charles. 'The *Minator* was sucked down in some kind of great whirlpool. She saw her go.'

'We must get her away from here. Get to Nassau. Poor child. Her mother will comfort her once she is well again herself. Everything will be all right in Nassau . . . make a fresh start.' He was mumbling the words as though speaking less to me than to himself, yet his watery blue eyes fixed themselves

on mine in a kind of apathetic plea for confirmation. Overnight, his florid, heavy face had become shrunken and pale, and I saw that the once bombastic government official was in little better plight than his women folk. Nevertheless, perhaps he had drawn some strength from his experiences, I felt sure. It had needed common sense and courage to live through that tempest. Now that the necessity was here, Charles would do whatever humanly could be done.

Farrel must have had the same thoughts, for he said in a compassionate voice, 'Yes, Charles, it is better you take them from here so that they can forget. You will all build a new life away from Constantine Cay.'

Charles nodded. 'There must be a boat coming soon. They are sure to send one to seek survivors.' He reached out his free arm to Isobel and took her from Malachi. 'Come, my dear, we shall go and sit beneath the trees. Your clothes will soon dry out in the sun.'

As yet there was no sun showing through the clouds that raced overhead, but I knew there soon would be. Isobel did not raise her eyes to discover whether the words were false or true, but she was ready to obey her husband. Together the Lavenhams stumbled away in the direction of a clump of palms that had by some miracle escaped total destruction, and sudden tears stung at my eyes as I watched them go.

'He is a good enough fellow,' Farrel observed. 'I confess I've had little time for him in the past, but whatever he may do for Isobel and her daughter, he will do.' As though he had suddenly lost all will to see the remains of the house, he sat down upon a cast-up log and smiled wryly at me. 'Another day begins, cousin. At least we have a fair chance that we shall see it through.'

I smiled at his old way of addressing me, and perhaps some of my love showed in that smile, for Malachi held out a huge hand to Matthew.

'Come, Mas' Matthew, let's you an' me go into that ol' house and see what we can find. I don't know 'bout you, but I could make use of a bite of food right now.'

'All right,' Matthew agreed readily. Boylike, I thought, he was already forgetting the past, eager to go forward with the

adventure of exploring. Yet his acceptance of Malachi as a companion was so unquestioning that I felt no harm could come from the query I found on my lips.

'Matthew . . . you know Malachi is your friend. Why were you once so frightened of him?'

He answered so unhesitatingly that I knew at once that no shadow of his old terror remained. 'Oh, that,' he said calmly, 'I made a mistake.'

'A *mistake?*'

'When I was aboard the *Minator*. The . . . night Captain Harden died.'

The night my father died, I reminded myself. But whatever had happened was in the past. It could touch neither of us now, so there was little point in flinching from it.

'What happened that night, Matthew?' I said quietly.

He said slowly: 'I was on deck, watching the stars. I shouldn't have been, because I was supposed to stay in my cabin once it was dark, but I hid behind a deck house where nobody could see me. I saw Captain Harden go for'd, and then he started talking with someone. I tried not to listen, but then they started to quarrel, and I was watching, and . . . and . . .'

'What happened then?' I prompted.

He took a deep breath, as if nerving himself to face something he would sooner have forgotten. 'It was all dark, but I could see a man against the sky. He . . . he raised his arm and hit Captain Harden on the head with somethting, so that he fell down. I was too frightened to move, and after a time Malachi carried him to the side and threw him overboard. It was in a patch of moonlight, so I could see him clearly.'

I heard Farrel's quick intake of breath beside me. 'And you took it for granted that it was Malachi who had killed Captain Harden.'

Matthew nodded. 'And when he saw me and picked me up I thought he was going to throw me over too . . . and I think I fainted. When I woke up I was in my own bunk again.'

'And yet you say it was all a mistake?'

The boy looked uncomfortable, as he answered, 'For a long time, yes. That's why I was so frightened of Malachi.

But then when Captain Fernac tried to hit you just before the storm, he looked just like the man I'd seen hitting Captain Harden on the boat. His arm seemed to go up in just the same way, and all of a sudden I just knew that it hadn't been Malachi I'd seen on the *Minator*, after all, but Captain Fernac. And . . . and I asked Malachi about it and he said it was true. He had just thrown the body overboard because his captain told him to.'

It could be the truth, I thought. Looking at Matthew's open face, it was patently obvious that it *was* true. I guessed that the nightmare of fear had been so strong, that it was no wonder that the boy I had first met aboard the *Minator* had been so cowed. I shuddered involuntarily, and as if in sympathy Matthew began to shiver too.

I put my hand on his shoulder. 'Come along,' I said, 'we'll see if we can find you some dry clothes somewhere in the house. You can go off with Malachi afterwards.'

He followed me readily enough, and with some difficulty we made our way through the ruined house. Much of the contents of Matthew's room seemed to have fallen to the ground floor, and with less difficulty than I had expected I found some reasonably dry clothes in a travelling case, and dressed him in them. But the hardships of the night had left their mark on him, for he showed little desire to return to the beach. Instead, he curled himself up on a patch of dry carpet and instantly fell asleep like a small dog.

'Matthew . . .' I began, but he made no reply, and so I smiled, and went in search of similarly dry apparel for myself.

When I returned to the beach, Farrel was sitting alone, holding his damaged shoulder. I wondered how he had survived these long hours without a murmur of pain. He would have risen but I bade him stay where he was, and slipped down to the ground at his feet.

'I wonder,' I said, 'what really happened on board the *Minator* that night.'

He held up a shell for my inspection, and as I took it, said: 'I have been talking to Malachi. From what he has told me, and from what I can guess, I think I can tell you close

enough.' He reached out and took my hand in his. 'It was true the *Minator* had an evil reputation as a slave ship. She was well known up and down the coast, and many a poor black devil must have had ill memories of her.'

I remembered the strange looks the revulsion almost, that had been showed me when coloured people had known the vessel on which I was travelling. Even that apparently meaningless slaughter of a cock must have been some kind of purification ceremony ... But what I could never wholly believe was that my father's ties with the ship were also ties with slavery.

Farrel went on. 'Malachi had been coxswain of the *Minator* in your father's day, so he was no stranger to what had gone on. When slaving died out, your father probably faced hard times. Then came the war between the states, and good money to be made by anyone prepared to run the Northern blockade.'

'It must have been then that your father met mine and contracted to transport much of the Gaytons estate out here—presumably in a ship already chartered. And it was he who my father chose to bring out the secret treasure he held in trust for his friends. And whose trust he was tempted to betray.'

I opened my mouth to speak, but he motioned me to silence. 'Some of what I think happened next you know of. The ship foundered in a storm and few lived to tell the tale. Indeed, perhaps the only ones were your father, Raoul—a young apprentice on an early voyage—and Malachi. *My* father never knew where the ship went down, nor could he find out for himself, for the shock of the loss and his own guilt brought on the apoplexy that trapped him as a lifelong prisoner to his chair. But things at Gaytons went from bad to worse, he desperately needed the money. And so he summoned your father—to the best of his belief the only man who knew where the treasure lay.'

'But Raoul knew too,' I said slowly.

'Yes,' Farrel agreed. 'It was a queer trick of fate that brought these two together again. I doubt if your father recognised Fernac, but Fernac certainly knew *him*. Whether

he knew of the gold waiting down there off Constantine Cay we have no means of knowing. For myself, I should imagine that your father's memories of the old days preyed on his mind, and at times he drank too much, and in their cups men are apt to talk. And Captain Harden had long carried a golden knife hilt as a memento of the affair, and probably to prove his tale.'

'And so Raoul killed my father in order to take his place.'

'I think not.' Farrel shook his head. 'Malachi says that the quarrel was—forgive me—of your father's making, and Fernac struck him simply as a means to keep him quiet. It was ill luck that caused him to fall and fatally strike his head. But let us say that the accident was convenient. The way was open for Raoul to take his place. To use his own wit to introduce himself at Constantine Cay, and offer himself as a substitute for the late Captain Harden. The only difference being that while your father would doubtless have kept faith with mine, Fernac meant to keep everything for himself. Men's greed for gold will take them into dark places.'

It had been such a plausible tale, I told myself. At any other time Raoul could have spent unquestioned weeks diving for the treasure of the supposed *Santa Anna*. And had it not been for the hilt of a dagger and a hurricane, he might well have met with success.

I said quietly, 'The storm will have buried all trace of the wreck. Wherever it lies, the gold is gone forever now.'

My companion, my dear companion, nodded without speaking.

'What will you do?'

'Do?' For a moment he stared out across the sea. 'Go back, I think.'

'To Alabama? To where Gaytons used to be?'

'I have a fancy for it. Most of the land has long gone to pay taxes, but I hear there are a few acres left where the house used to stand. If I sell out my sponge interests to the Greeks I'll have a little money. Not much, but enough to keep me until I can set about what I've a mind to do.'

He spoke of 'I'. For a moment my heart was heavy at the thought he still wanted to be alone. But I had strength too, it

was up to me to use it. There was also Matthew. I must let Farrel see none of my disappointment.

I lifted my chin. 'And what is that?' I asked him.

'The land is full of bitterness now the war is over. For years what used to be the Confederacy will hate the North for what it has done. But I served my time up there as a prisoner, and though my father never forgave me for saying it, there was much to be said on their side.'

'And you feel you are the man to say it?'

Farrel shrugged his shoulders. 'Not *the* man. But a man—yes. I've never thought of myself in public life, but one has to start somewhere. And I'm a Southerner born and bred—in spite of my Irish ancestry. They might listen to me, while they would turn a deaf ear to someone else. And if I cannot repay the gold my father took, perhaps I can repay the debt another way.'

He hesitated for a moment, then raised his eyes to meet mine. 'It's one man's life, Judith, and likely to be a hard one. How I wish I had the courage to ask you to share it with me . . .'

'My dear, dear cousin,' I said, my spirits soaring again to a pinnacle of joy, 'you may rise to be a Congressman for all I know. Would you really want to be married to the daughter of a slaver?'

'Ask your Matthew if he has any strong objections to his uncle . . . his new father . . . being the son of a thief.' Farrel smiled suddenly, the brilliant smile I had seen all too little of. He pulled me to him suddenly, and I slipped forward and fell in the sand. Then we were laughing together like children, and kissing, and kissing again, then I brushed the sand from his face and my finger tips touched his scar.

'What is it?' He raised his own hand and laid it with mine. 'Oh—that. I had forgot.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, my love. I know.' I put my lips to his once more, then got my feet. 'I must go and see if Matthew is still asleep. Where is Malachi?'

'Gone to the beacon to watch for a boat.' He held my hand with his good one.

'Stay awhile,' he said.

About the Author

Catherine Dillon has worked for many British magazines, as well as film and television companies. After spending some years in the United States, she now divides her time between Norfolk and Buckinghamshire. Her main interests are antiques, modern jewelery, and travel. She has been all over the world and enjoys finding new and exotic settings for her novels.